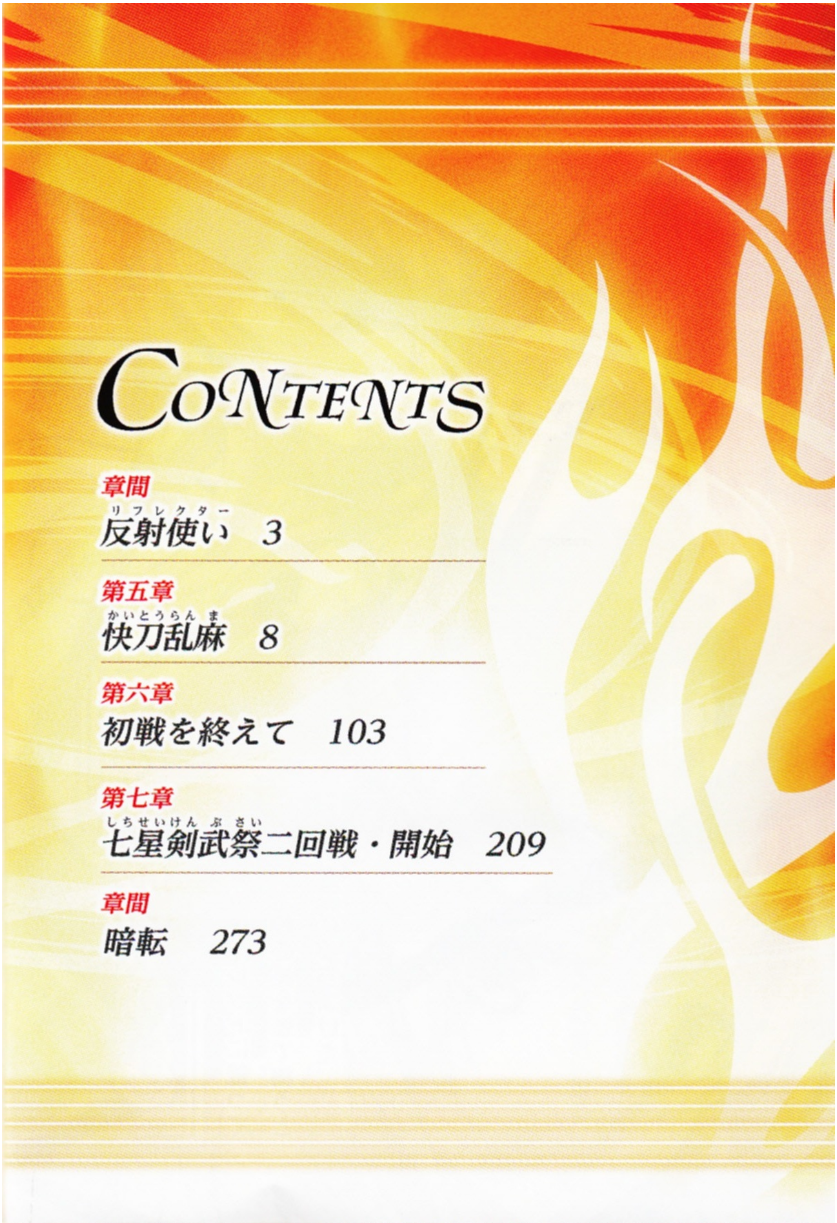
落第騎士の英雄譚（キャバルリィ）

6

海空りく
RIKU MISORA

Illust をん

GA文庫



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落第騎士
英雄譚
Cavalry

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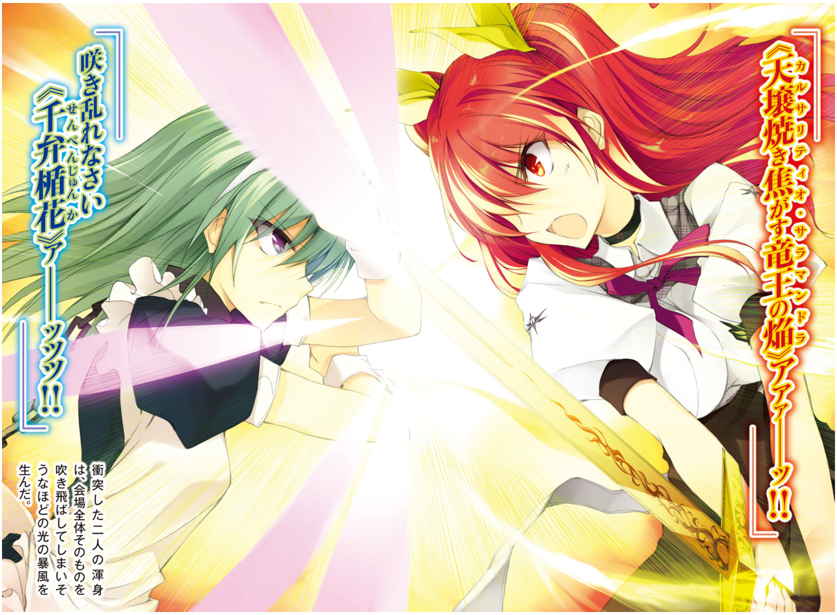
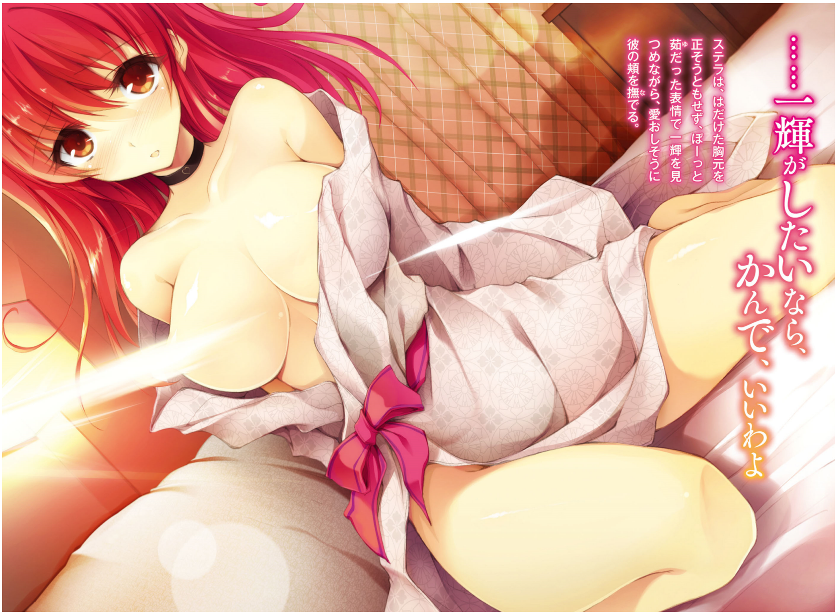
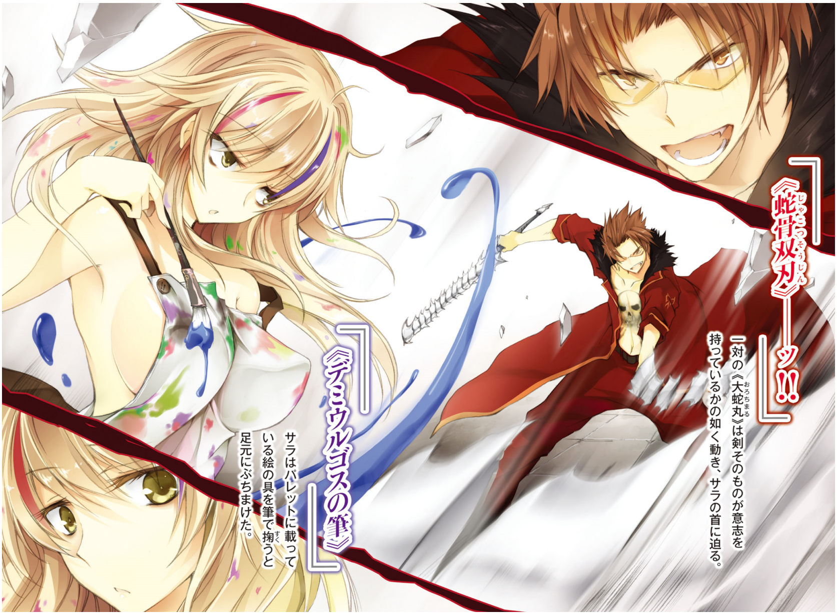

『《天壌焼き焦がす竜王の焔（カルサリティオ・サラマンドラ）》アアァーーッ!!』
『咲き乱れなさい《千弁楯花（せんべんじゅんか）》アーーーッツツ!!』

衝突した二人の渾身は、会場全体そのものを吹き飛ばしてしまいそうなほどの光の暴風を生んだ。


……一輝がしたいなら、かんで、いいわよ

ステラは、はだけた胸元を正そうともせず、ぽーっと茹（ゆ）だった表情で一輝を見つめながら、愛おしそうに彼の頬を撫（な）でる。



「《蛇骨双刃（じゃこつそうじん）》――ッ!!」

一対の《大蛇丸（おろちまる）》は剣そのものが意志を持っているかの如く動き、サラの首に迫る。

「《デミウルゴスの筆》」

サラはパレットに載っている絵の具を筆で掬（すく）うと足元にぶちまけた。

Intermission: Reflector

「The first round of the sixty-second Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival is reaching its climax! In Block A, the Sword Emperor of Wind Ouma Kurogane and Panzer Grizzly Renji Kaga both won swift victories! As is only reasonable, these singular, national powerhouses have emerged triumphant! In Block B, newcomer Akatsuki Academy is flexing its muscles with a three-zero shutout—not one of Akatsuki's opponents, all tough customers themselves, has been able to wound its students! This school has certainly made its strong presence felt here! And fresh in everyone's minds is Block C where the previous champion, Seven Stars Sword King Yuudai Moroboshi, fell unexpectedly to F-Rank Knight Ikki Kurogane in a dramatic showdown! This has been a tumultuous Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival right from day one! But this match—the fourth match of Block B, that was delayed due to Stella Vermillion's tardiness—must be the most outrageous match in the history of the Festival! With the agreement of her opponent, Mikoto Tsuruya, she has set herself a special rule—to fight all the remaining members of Block B in a four-on-one match! How will this all play out? I have no idea!」

The excited voice of the commentator flowed forth from the television speakers. Behind him, the shouts of the crowd that packed the Bay Dome resounded like an earthquake. Their reaction was only natural. Fights between knights were conventionally one-on-one. There had never before been a case of a four-versus-one match in all the history of the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival. This was the very first time this had happened—and thus it was an unpredictable irregularity.

What was Crimson Princess Stella Vermillion thinking, to have suggested something so reckless as a four-versus-one match? Raikiri Touka Toudou and Scharlach Frau Kanata Toutokubara, who were in front of the TV, knew the reason.

"Stella-san is a really kind person…."

"…Yes, President. We have been blessed with a fine underclassman."

They understood. Stella did not intend to let a single one escape, those representatives from Akatsuki Academy who had left Hagun in shambles before. If the tournament went according to schedule, Puppeteer Reisen Hiraga and Beast Tamer Rinna Kazamatsuri would meet in the second round—a match between colleagues from Akatsuki Academy. When that happened, one of the two would certainly choose to forfeit and not take part in the battle. After all, they were mercenaries hired by Prime Minister Tsukikage to dominate the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival as a force that did not belong to the League of Mage-Knight Nations. They had no interest in such things as fighting for glory as student knights, and would not diminish their fighting strength for the sake of such a thing either.

Stella understood this. Thus, using her tardiness as an excuse, she proposed such a reckless thing. This was all for the sake of the students of Hagun Academy, starting with Touka and the others, who had been hurt during Akatsuki Academy's assault on Hagun.

It was something that should have made one happy. Thankful, even. But Kanata was hardly gladdened.

"...But President, Stella-san's kindness... pains me."

"Why is that?"

"Her kindness and consideration for us has driven her into a corner." Kanata's voice was low and her face was drawn with regret. "To have to face Yui Tatara and three others in a handicap battle... is the worst possible situation."

Sensing something off about Kanata's expression, Touka remembered something. During the assault, Kanta had been the one to fight Yui Tatara.

"I was focused on defeating Ouma at the time, so I didn't pay much attention to the details of your battles, but is Yui Tatara really such a knight as you say she is?"

"It's a bit embarrassing, but I was unable to harm a hair on her head even once."

"Eh...!?"

Touka was rendered speechless.

Not a hair had been harmed. This was not an uncommon occurrence in battles between knights. Touka herself had defeated the Lorelei Shizuku Kurogane without being injured as well. However, winning that way against Scharlach Frau was a different matter. Even in the pinnacle of the competitive knight combat scene, the King of Knights A-League, there was no one who could fight Kanata and come out unscathed. This was because of her Noble Art Diamond Dust, which dispersed the blade of her Device into small particles invisible to the naked eye and then was used to pierce her opponents. Evading the technique fully was very difficult—these particles were so small that they could even enter one's lungs through inhalation. Thus, finding someone who could defeat her without themselves being wounded was close to impossible.

But according to Kanata, Yui Tatara had done so. Then—

The worst-case scenario flashed across Touka's mind.

"Could she be a Reflector?!"

Kanata nodded. Touka's worst-case guess was the reality. As the name suggested, such Blazers could reflect all their opponents' attacks back at them; their expertise lay in the way their ability would increase in power the stronger the attacks they received were. In other words—

"For the Crimson Princess, who boasts overwhelming power—this will be the worst opponent she's had up to this point."

Chapter 5: Cutting the Knot

Part 1

Osaka Bay City—a city planning project discarded halfway. Ordinarily a ghost town with nary a soul to be seen, its symbol of ruination—the Bay Dome—as now packed to capacity with uncounted numbers of people, all having come to watch the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival, the festival of Japan's student knights.

「You were the one who wanted somethin' like this four-on-one! Show us a good time, Crimson Princess!」

「Time for Akatsuki to show us their stuff too!」

「Don't lose to them, Mikoto-chan!」

The start signal for Block B's fourth match—the match with the unprecedented four-versus-one rule—had already been sounded. The excitement at this irregularity had swiftly whipped the crowd into a frenzy. But this sentiment was limited to the stands. At the heart of that whirlwind of excitement, Yui Tatara's heart burned with a different emotion from where she was within the ring.

That emotion was rage.

How dare she belittle me…!

Naturally, that rage was directed at Stella. She had been the one to suggest a four versus one. In other words, she believed that she could put herself at a numbers disadvantage and still be able to defeat them. Leaving aside Stella's original opponent Mikoto Tsuruya, who would have wished for this situation anyway, this was a favorable development for them. They were here to dominate the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival. But for Yui, who had been forced onstage, this could not be more annoying—being looked down upon to this extent unbearably so.

I'll make you regret thinking so highly of yourself…!

"'Ey, Hiraga. This is an official match. They'll write it off as an accident even if I kill my opponent, no?"

"Heh heh heh. Yes, of course. Our client will understand—Tsukikage is himself a knight, after all."

"Hehehe. Then I'm not gonna go easy on 'er!"

Having obtained the consent of Hiraga, who was serving as the match overseer, she bared a fanged grin.

"No holdin' back this time! Eat yer fill, *Sweeping Centipede*!"

As she grinned, she reared back the starter cord of her chainsaw-shaped Device, *Sweeping Centipede*.

The limb-like blades whirred to life with a sound like as to the ear-piercing shrieks of the dying. Wielding her wailing weapon aloft, Yui gouged up the ring even as she rushed toward Stella.

「Akatsuki Academy's Yui Tatara is on the offensive, a strong assault without any hesitation! On the other hand, Stella Vermillion is… wha—!?」

Suddenly, the commentator was rendered speechless. The reason lay in Stella's hands.

「Stella has yet to materialize her Device! What is the meaning of this!?」

Similarly, an outcry ran through the stands.

「The hell 're ya doin'! Draw your blade!」

「Hey now, hasn't the signal to begin been sounded? Could it be that she doesn't understand Japanese?」

「No, it's in English. But then, why hasn't she drawn?」

They did not understand why Stella had not drawn her weapon to face her opponent. But even as this doubt hung all about, the battle was afoot. Her body hugging the ground, long black hair trailing behind her like a serpent, Yui closed on Stella, and with a cry of—

"Die!"

—aimed a brutal strike at Stella's undefended head with *Sweeping Centipede*.

It was too broad a stroke, too straightforward an attack—hardly any trouble for Stella, who possessed athleticism far beyond the norm. With the slightest sway backwards she evaded the screaming saw.

"Gyaaaa!"

But Yui seemed unfazed by the evasion, employing her strength in a series of reckless swings. Her craft was graceless, her swordsmanship like children playing at samurai. But her weapon, the chainsaw, made all the difference. As a blade that was powered by magic, it required no technique—even the mere kiss of that saw sliced and splintered the specially-made flooring of the ring as it made for Stella.

「Tatara is dispensing with defense for an amazing offense—! Wielding her chainsaw mightily, she attacks and attacks!」

However unrefined the swordsmanship, it would be difficult to continually evade that number of attacks. Stella had to meet it with her sword. But despite that, she had yet to draw *Lævateinn*.

「Tatara's firing on all cylinders here! She's pursuing Stella, giving her no breathing room! What a prodigious assault, it's almost like a tornado! Her technique is quite raw, and as such there are many openings to be exploited… but Stella is still empty-handed!」

「Whoa! That timing there was really risky!」

「Is Tatara gradually beginning to grasp her movements?」

「It's scary just watching! Just hurry up and draw your sword!」

Her opponent had come out all guns blazing from the starting signal, and yet Stella persisted in not drawing her blade—her actions filled the stadium with voices of confusion. What on earth could she be thinking, they wondered. But their doubts would be answered by the man in the analyst seat—ex-King of Knights A-League participant Muroto.

「She's most likely measuring her opponent's attack timing.」

「Measuring… attack timing?」

「In this morning's third Block B match, Tatara had been up against Rentei's Niidome. His axe strike was repelled by an unseen force, and she took advantage of the huge knock-back to slash and thus defeat him. Her ability is definitely the reflection of force—an incredibly potent combat-oriented power. One could leave a huge opening and thus self-destruct if one simply swings recklessly at her… and given Stella's offensive power, it will not simply suffice to call it an 'opening'.」

After all, Yui Tatara's Noble Art, Total Reflect, was an ability that grew in proportion to the power of her opponent's offensive strength. If Stella's exceptional strength were to be reflected, it would not be strange to see her arms shattered.

「In any case, one needs to get around the reflection process in order to defeat Reflectors like Yui Tatara. As such, Stella's strategy of observing her opponent's timing while not materializing her Device or letting her opponent read her own attacks is a correct one.」

「In other words, she intends to hide her cards till the very last moment, before defeating Tatara in a single blow before she can use her ability. That is Stella's strategy, am I right?」

「That is how I'd see it, yes.」

Seated in the stands, Stella's friend Arisuin recalled a certain event at Muroto's words.

"Somehow, she reminds me of Ikki at that time. Do you remember, Shizuku?"

"I never forget anything about Onii-sama. You refer to the time we fought Rebellion at the shopping mall, don't you?"

That was before the school selection matches. While the four of them had been out at the shopping mall, they had been attacked by a group of looters from Rebellion. Their leader had been a man named Bischof, who wielded an ability very similar to Yui's.

"At that time, Stella had been right beside Onii-sama—she definitely remembers his strategy from having seen it."

At that time, Ikki had executed a slash exceeding Bishou's motion perception while concealing his blade, and thus broke through his reflection. Avoiding the reflection using a super-high speed attack that surpassed the Reflector's reaction speed was an effective—and indeed the right way to go about dealing with a Reflector opponent.

"However, there is a problem if Stella wants to imitate Ikki."

"And that problem would be?"

White-Robed Knight Kiriko Yakushi, who had remained with them after watching the match between Ikki and Moroboshi together, asked.

"Speed. Certainly, Stella-chan's is a greatsword that boasts unrivalled destructive power, but its speed is far from that of Ikki's Raikou. Moreover, since it spans a human's height in length its swing has to be broader. Can it really produce a speed that rivals Raikou's, I wonder."

No, even if she is indeed able to do that, can she really deceive Rebellion's famed hitman, the Unturning…? Having once been a part of Rebellion himself under the moniker Black Assassin, Arisuin was ill at ease. His unease would not fail to take a turn for the worse, for as she chased Stella about about wielding her chainsaw, Yui let out a small chuckle.

This idiotic woman…!

She scorned her opponent's shallowness and folly.

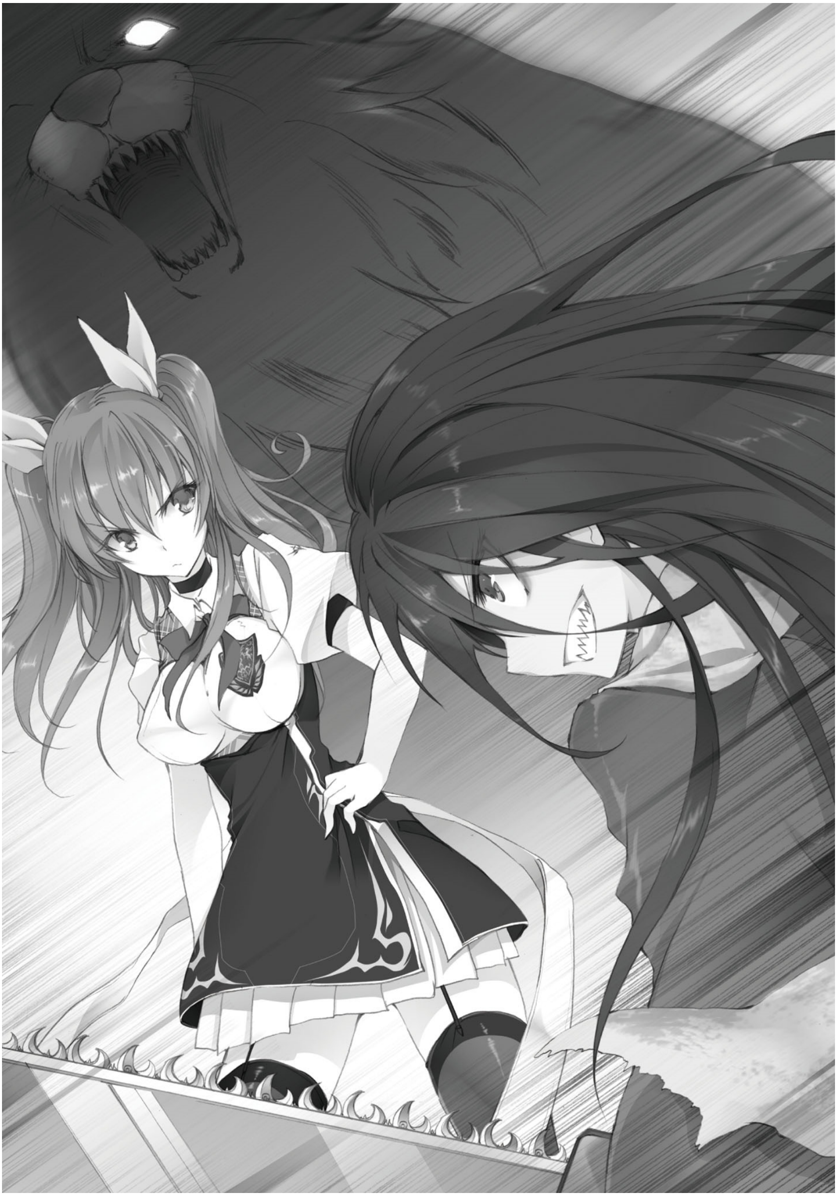
Well of course one would have no time to activate her ability if she is defeated before she can recognize what is going on. This was the right line of thought, but—

-Don'cha dare rope me in with the likes of that lil' punk Bischof. I was raised in a clan of killers who served Rebellion from generation to generation—tried and proven hitmen!

She was different from Bischof, who had stepped onto crooked paths for his own enjoyment. She was raised to be a killer. There was nothing good or evil about that. The training had been fierce: in order to train her to be able to use Total Reflect whenever and wherever, her own father had constantly tried to kill her since she was three. Those sleepless days where a bullet could fly at her at any moment went on for ten years, leaving her with nigh-unremovable bags under her eyes… and also a focus and motion perception sufficient to perceive every single bullet in a hail of gunfire. Thus, gunshots, explosions, cuts, even the skills Blazers used—she could reflect any threat, chasing down her target step by inexorable step till it was eliminated.

It was this fighting style that had earned her the moniker of Unturning. Her eyes were such that she had been able to perceive clearly Ikki's show of Edelweiss' swordsmanship. Thus, it was impossible to deceive The Unturning Killer. Regardless of how one tried to hide their aggression, waiting for an opportunity to strike—that moment would never come.

And anyway, I have no reason to play along with an opponent who's got no options!



"Rinna! Get her-!"

She roared hoarsely, calling to a young lady astride a black lion who had managed to creep up behind Stella while she had busied herself dodging Yui's wild blows—Beast Tamer Rinna Kazamatsuri.

"Do not presume to give me orders! I have no need of your words!"

So she rebutted, but nonetheless acted as Tatara had desired. When it wore the collar of subordination, Kazamatsuri's Device, her lion, became able to utilize a Noble Arts—in this case, manipulating the concept of stoppage.

"Cower! King's Pressure!"

"Guuooohhhhh—!"

"Tch…!"

A sonic blast came at Stella from behind her, right from her blind spot. Her attention being drawn by Yui, she could not evade this blow. From the wide-open jaws of the lion issued forth a torrent of sound that struck her full-on, stripping her of all mobility.

「Aaah! This is bad! Stella's been caught by the Beast Tamer's Noble Art, King's Pressure, the same one that robbed Bunkyoku Academy's Komashiro of the ability to move in the first round! There's no way Tatara will let this critical opportunity pass!」

"I'll finish ya before you ever draw! Just keep cowering there and die!"

Sawblades screamed as they drew a horizontal arc towards Stella, unable to move due to King's Pressure, and struck home right in her defenseless midsection.

"Raaaahh!"

With a mighty swing, Yui blew Stella away.

Then—

"King's Charge!"

—another strike came in as insurance. It was the charge of a magically-empowered lion, a beast that already possessed mass and strength far surpassing that of men. As such, it was only to be expected that Stella, weighing only as much as a normal girl, was knocked back with ease, bouncing like a rubber ball across and out of the ring.

The force sent her into the concrete wall just below the spectator stands, and with a crash and a cloud of plaster a portion of the masonry came crumbling down.

Part 2

「A keen blow! Tatara and Kazamatsuri with the clean one-two punch! Stella was blown right out of the ring—terrible, terrible damage!"」

「Wow… that was horrible!」

「…Is she dead?」

The stands were silenced as they witnessed something in a way more grotesque than a bloodletting: a human being blasted away like a bullet.

In that strange silence, the PA system started a countdown. If she was unable to return to the ring within ten counts, she would be judged as having lost by ring-out.

「Stella's body cannot be made out, buried under that pile of dust and debris as she is. But that wall should have been able to withstand a direct hit from a tank cannon—that it is broken speaks volumes of the severity of the damage she must have taken is clear. Will she be able to make it back into the ring within ten counts!?」

「Hey, hey, get it together!」

「I was all hyped up to see what the famed Crimson Princess would be like too….」

「A four-versus-one was too reckless after all! She was so easily hit from behind!」

「You can hear the disappointment in the stands! It can't be helped—who could have expected that the Crimson Princess, a hot favorite to win it all, would be in such danger of defeat so easily?」

Muroto shook his head at these words.

「No. In any case this much was not unexpected. Rather, it was a matter of course.」

「Wh, what do you mean, Muroto-pro?」

「I'm saying that fighting multiple opponents alone is this difficult. If we go by the numbers, it is a four-on-one, but if we factor in the difference in the number of attacks, the kinds of tactics that could arise from the different mix of abilities and thought processes, the difference in battle-strength does not follow the numbers. It could even be five or ten times more than that. The Crimson Princess can indeed be said to be at the level of one-in-a-million, but despite that this handicap is not light—the fact that she was hit from behind so easily is proof. Moreover, this field is also an issue.」

「This field, you say?」

「Yes. As you can see, the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival's ring is a flat circle without any cover whatsoever. There is nowhere to hide oneself, or anywhere to conceal one's movements. This environment lends itself well to those who would assert the numbers advantage. The gap in power increases yet more when one factors this in as well. 」

「So this result was expected, you mean.」

Muroto nodded slightly.

「It's fine to be confident, but going up against four people at once is recklessness, plain and simple. Vermillion is a brilliant A-Rank Knight, but her opponents are far from pushovers.」

The Crimson Princess had underestimated the terrors of a battle against numbers. Shizuku made a bitter face as she listened to Muroto's analysis from her place in the spectator stands.

"What on earth is that girl doing!?"

"Shizuku...."

"I'm an idiot—when she confidently asked for that four-versus-one match, I was actually expecting her to have gotten stronger in her training with Saikyou-sensei. To have confidence is one thing, but for her to be this careless makes no sense!"

"Indeed, getting taken by surprise so easily back there was too careless."

"Really…!"

She could not help but give vent to her bubbling anger. But from where she stood, this anger was only normal. Her brother's lover, Stella, had taken that unique place in his heart that Shizuku desired… then she had just upped and left without notice to go somewhere, making him worry a great deal. That was difficult to forgive no matter what. And adding to that, the one to come up with the suicidal modified four-versus-one rules that had to this present outcome had been none other than her. That made it even harder.

Even though she had made that promise to meet her brother in the finals… even though her brother had fought for that sake, overcoming a difficult foe….

"If she loses here… if she betrays the promise she made with Onii-sama here." Shizuku spoke poisonously, her small fists trembling. "I will go down there into the ring and squeeze the life out of her myself!"

Kurono smiled wryly from beside them at the seriousness in her voice.

I wish you wouldn't say that in front of me—I'm still a teacher, you know?

Well, she did know how much Shizuku loved her brother Ikki, and thus could understand her anger at her brother's lover's disappointing performance. If she was merely speaking in anger, Kurono would not have blamed her.

"But you shouldn't blame Vermillion too much."

"…Why? She's making a laughingstock of herself out there."

"Well, if you had to blame this one on anyone, it would have to be her teacher."

"Her teacher?"

The blame for having called for but being unable to deal with the disadvantages of a four-versus-one battle and being beaten down pathetically lay not with Stella, but rather with Saikyou? Unable to comprehend Kurono's reasoning, Shizuku gave it some thought.

"Are you saying that Saikyou-sensei's teaching methods were subpar?"

In response, Kurono flashed a wry smile—no, it was more the grin of the cat that got the cream, as though she was expecting something interesting to happen.

"I guess this was bound to happen if she'd even managed to pass on her slovenly ways. You see, that combo didn't hit Vermillion because she was careless, but because she found it too tiresome to dodge."

"Eh?"

In that instant, it happened. With a crash that resounded throughout the stadium, a huge piece of rubble that might have weighed a ton was sent rocketing into the sky from where it had lain atop Stella.

"Wha—!?"

At that sound, Shizuku's eyes returned to the ring.

Naturally, the one who had knocked it away was Stella, who had been buried underneath. Having swept away the debris atop her with a skyward straight from her right fist, she leapt lightly back into the ring—just in time for the count of eight… and with nary a scratch on her from either the charge or the cut to the stomach, she casually swept the remaining dust from her uniform.

And she muttered as though having understood something.

"…Hmm. That's all you have, huh?"

Part 3

「Wh-Whaaat!? Having taken direct hits from both King's Charge and the *Sweeping Centipede*, Stella was hurled from the ring! On the count of eight, she leisurely returned to the ring—and, and… beyond her uniform being torn up in several places, she hasn't a scratch on her! What on earth is this!?」

Her unharmed state threw both the commentator and the audience alike into an uproar. But Yui, who had attacked her, already knew what the reason was. Earlier, when her horizontal sweep had swept into Stella's stomach, she had not felt it tear into her flesh at all. Sweeping Centipede's revolving blades had sliced open her uniform, but had failed to eat into her skin.

Why? The reason was magic power. Earlier, in the battle between the Worst One and the Seven Stars Sword King, Yuudai Moroboshi had wrapped himself in an armor made of his own magic power to use as a barrier against impacts. The effectiveness of such barriers was dependent on the amount of magic power its user possessed. And Crimson Princess Stella Vermillion's magic power could be considered among the best in the entire world, so the barrier that she subconsciously erected about herself was far from ordinary, strong enough to allow her to take full-blooded blows from Yui and Rinna head-on and yet cancel out all the damage she should have taken.

Stella had realized this, and as such had stopped dodging conscientiously. She did not feel the need to. This truth wounded Yui's pride deeply.

"You bastard… just how much did you look down on me, playing along like that…."

Stella replied unapologetically.

"Don't make such a scary face. This was inevitable. After all, my opponent up till yesterday was the strongest knight in the Pan-Pacific region."

In all honesty, Stella was not the sort to intentionally humiliate her opponent. They were simply on different planes. After all, the one training Stella this whole week had been one of the strongest people in the world, the Yaksha Princess, a gravity user who boasted such outrageous offensive power that she could pull a meteorite from beyond the atmosphere at two times escape velocity. Thus, no matter how she tried she could not feel any sense of danger against this opponent, and because she could not feel any danger it became tiresome to evade each and every attack.

When Kurono said that the fault lay with Saikyou, this was what she had meant. This was, however, but one of the reasons. Stella had another important reason for not resisting and allowing Yui to hit her.

"Moreover, I wanted to confirm something before going on the offensive."

"Confirm something?"

"Yes. I wanted to see what level of knights you are."

She could not leave this step out. After all—

"If I were to unleash my full strength thoughtlessly, you could all die."

"Tch…!"

Yes. Stella understood. She understood the extent of her strength. If wielded against humans, her ability was nothing short of somewhat gratuitous brutality, to the point where reducing human life to ash was a thing of ease. So she had to be aware of the opponent she had to fight at all times, taking care so as to not burn them to death, even if they were a hated enemy who had hurt her friends.

"Akatsuki owes us some revenge, and I won't rest till I've gotten it. I don't intend to kill you."

She felt less than at peace with this, but above that—

"But… that's because I don't see the value in doing that for you. You would indiscriminately display your intent to kill to anyone, but there is only one person in this world that I would value fighting as a knight, one opponent that I would give my all against."

There was only one such man so special, who could inspire such feeling and passion in Stella that she would forsake noblesse oblige and fight him at her full strength.

"That's why I sought to ascertain your strength, be sure of your level—so I can know how far I must go to break you without killing you."

By this point, she had grasped the gist of it. If she put herself into third gear, she could probably just about accommodate them. Keeping this in mind, she finally materialized her Device, *Lævateinn*.

"I'm going to attack from here on out."

In an instant, a heat wave billowed out around her, warping the very air. It was an overwhelming presence, as though the summer sun had drew near to the earth—the presence of a knight far from ordinary.

But Yui was unafraid.

"Interestin'. ...Come at me then, if you've got the stuff!"

With a roar, she kicked off the ground with all her might and attacked Stella for the third time, not caring that her attack had failed to make any dent on Stella. Had her blood run too hot, making her forget that fact? No. She was well-trained. Born a killer. She had learned how to keep a cool head amid heated emotions. She was certainly surprised that her clean hit had done no damage, but a Blazer's world was full of those who played against common logic. To find a Blazer who could not be harmed by direct attacks was not rare. She herself belonged to that category of Blazers, after all.

There were ways around it. This, she already understood.

My blade can't do it, but yours is a different story, ain't it!?

In that case, she only needed to reflect it. Her arrogance, her attack, the uncommon magical might that powered that attack—all of them. Even one such as the Crimson Princess could not emerge unscathed after having her full strength reflected back at her. Her arms would certainly be rendered unusable, and once she was wounded to that extent then Yui could take care of her at her own leisure.

For that to happen, she had to allow Stella to attack first. Thus, Yui forged ahead straight as an arrow, baiting out that full-power attack.

"Then, I'll help myself."

In response to her scheme, Stella met her directly, advancing to close the distance between them with *Lævateinn* brandished in her right hand as she aimed a diagonal downward slash for Yui's shoulder.

This reaction was exactly as Yui had thought. If this slash was bounced back by Total Reflect, Stella would get a taste of her own medicine. But right at that moment when she was about to activate Total Reflect—

Ah—?

—she smelled a rat. Her years of experience as a killer warned her that something was off.

Since *Sweeping Centipede* itself could deal no damage, Yui aimed to use Total Reflect to compensate. That should have been obvious. Then why was Stella still wielding her sword to cut, like a fool?

It was a trap—that was the only possible reason. Upon listening closely, the sound of the blade as it whistled through the air was too soft. That slash had speed, but there was no strength behind it. And from the first, Stella's weapon was a longsword. To wield it in only one hand was by itself already odd.

No damage would be done even if she reflected this; it would push her back at the very most. The right side is just a feint. The real strike comes from the left—!

With keen eye and swift mind Yui perceived all this with precision, that within the shadow of the falling blade a cocked fist laid in wait. Stella likely had this plan in mind: when Yui used Total Reflect on that downward racing blade, it would knock her right side back, and in tandem her left flank would be thrust forward, sending her left fist into Yui's side at speeds beyond her ability to react. It was a plan that had even taken her abilities and their effects into account.

And it's a good one, but that don't mean jack if I've caught on to it!

The tables had turned from the moment she had noticed the trap. The hunter was now the hunted.

To this end, Yui played Stella's script right to the hilt. The instant their blades met, she projected her Reflecting barrier from her body, distorting the vector of Stella's strike and repelling her. And in that same moment, Stella moved exactly as Yui had anticipated. Using the opening that had been created by the Reflection of her blade, she unleashed her surprise attack, her hidden ace: a liver shot.

Her opponent, lured by that opening, had put her full strength into that punch. Seizing the moment, Yui reactivated Total Reflect. That was a blow that had borrowed both Stella's strength and the rotational force she had redirected from the initial Reflection on her right side to give more power to her strike from the left. From this surely her fist, even her entire arm, would be shattered. Having committed for the opening, Stella could not retract her fist either.

Having seen through it all, her opponent dancing in the palm of her hand, Yui's lips quirked upward in dark amusement.

Crunch

With the sound of flesh and bone breaking—

"Gah…hak—!"

Stella's left fist—that fist that should have been reflected—burrowed deep into Yui's side.

"And that's one down."

Part 4

Tatara's body, having taken Stella's mighty blow to the side, folded in two at the waist, and with a spray of spittle and blood it collapsed upon the ring floor.

「A direct hit with a powerful liver shot! Tatara falls face-first to the ring. She's not moving! She's not getting up! She's out cold! With but one single blow, Vermillion has brought down her opponent!」

「Whaa! That was a super scary sound!」

「She's bent at that weird ninety-degree angle… what kind of arm strength does Vermillion have?」

「The stands too are shaken by the might of Vermillion's fist! But from my vantage point, Tatara very apparently saw through her ruse, and activated Total Reflect on her hidden left fist… so how did Vermillion manage to dodge Total Reflect?」

The one who answered was Muroto.

「She did not do anything of that sort.」

「Eh!?」

「Look at her left hand.」

Upon seeing Stella's left hand at Muroto's suggestion, the commentator could not help but cry out.

「Th-This…! This is horrible! Stella's left hand is all torn up, almost like it's been twisted using a corkscrew! But, then this means that….」

「Yes. The Crimson Princess didn't avoid Total Reflect. As Tatara had foreseen, the Total Reflect did indeed shatter her left hand—she certainly hit the mark there… but for one thing. She had not expected that the Crimson Princess would follow through and hit her with that shattered arm without any regard for her injury!」

Humans were most liable to let their guard down when they saw that all was going as they planned. Yui was no exception to the rule. When she saw that she had broken Stella's hand as planned, she had smirked. That smirk had become her downfall. Stella had been aiming for that very moment. Pivoting on her feet, she had brought the full strength of that fist—along with the power of Total Reflect—to bear in that blow.

There was nothing beautiful about that move. It was a breakthrough via brute force. But even with her arm destroyed to such an extent, Stella still knocked Yui unconscious in one strike. And it was even using a body blow, with which it was normally hard to knock a person out.

She's insane…!

Standing and bearing witness all this while in the same ring, Kyomon Academy's third year student, Icy Laughter Mikoto Tsuruya, was shaken.

She's too strong…!

Yui's techniques, tactics… they had all been overwhelmed by that strategic-class arm strength. And that was to say nothing of her will, strong in the face of the injury that she herself would receive.

A strong body, a strong mind, and the cunning to use them well. She was simply a gem.

I don't even match up at all….

But she had to win. The Festival was an elimination tournament—even a single loss could not be tolerated. Not even if, as though toying with her, fate had sent her the worst possible opponent for her first round match. That was why she had shamelessly borrowed Akatsuki's strength, and now that she'd gone this far already, a loss was all the more an unacceptable notion. Her pride would not allow her to accept that result no matter what.

Besides, if I pull through here, I will be able to dominate the entire B Block…!

It was with this confidence that she urged her quailing heart on.

"Worry not. We will win."

A tepid, almost half-hearted attempt at a statement was voiced behind her. The owner of that voice was the ominous, pierrot-clad man—Akatsuki Academy's Puppeteer, Reisen Hiraga.

"…You mean to say you have some kind of plan against a monster who won't even be hurt after taking a direct hit from a Device?"

Her tone was prickly, the aura of dubiousness that he exuded making him rather unlikeable. But he did not seem to mind, instead laughing throatily.

"Haha. While it is indeed surprising that a direct hit from Yui's *Sweeping Centipede* failed to accomplish anything… in the end, that was merely the effect of magic power itself. The Crimson Princess is not a defense-oriented Blazer, and as such breaking her barrier of magic is simple. My own ace should be able to see us victorious in one strike."

"Well it sure would have been helpful if you'd used it sooner."

Reisen shook his head.

"While I would have very much liked to have done so, it is most regrettable that this Noble Art requires some time."

"So you can't use it."

"Hah. I am ashamed. However, if we can last that long, I assure you that my ace shall break her with ease. Thus, if I may so trouble you, could you buy me a little time to until I have completed the preparations for my technique? We of Akatsuki would be rid of the troublesome Crimson Princess, while you would clear this hellish first round—it is to our mutual benefit that we should aid one another now, as people on the same team, is it not?"

Mikoto responded with silence and a displeased furrowing of her brows. It was his voice. There was scorn in every word he said, as though he were mocking the world and everything in it. It made her sick; just hearing it rubbed her the wrong way.

But on the other hand, he had a point. Right now, they were fighting on the same side. Cooperation would be the efficient course of action. Moreover—

I don't have any means of beating Stella, but this guy says he does.

If only for this alone, she had no reason to refuse him.

"I understand. But—I can't guarantee this will go well."

"How timid."

"If I did have confidence, then I wouldn't have had to rely on the cooperation of shady folk like you and your ilk."

With that said, she placed her left palm over her right eye, and swept it across to reveal a monocle—Icy Laughter Mikoto Tsuruya's Device.

"Done with the hush-hush chit-chat?"

Mikoto entered a stance, and beyond the rim of her monocle was the levelled gaze of the crimson-eyed knight, her red hair trailing wisps of flame.

"Did you wait for us on purpose?"

"Yes. I came late from the first, and then—even though it was with your agreement—made you go along with my desire to vent my anger. I'm really sorry about that… so I'll be more gentle on you."

"That's considerate of you. I wonder if you could considerately cede this match?"

"Hahaha. I like your thick skin, Tsuruya-san, but that's impossible. After all, this fight is very important to me."

"That so? Can't be helped then."

"Yes. I'm afraid the complementary service ends there. I'm coming over now. If you want to resign, the earlier the better. I will not retract my blade once I've swung it!"

With that, Stella kicked off the ground and charged towards Mikoto.

"Tch—!"

That embodiment of violence, that had taken down Yui without a thought for her ruined arm, was now closing in with that greatsword in her good hand. Coming to destroy her. Nothing good would come of taking that strike on. It would most probably make all the hurts she'd taken so far feel like mere tickling. She might even die. The fear that pierced Tsuruya's heart could paralyse her mind.

But even so, she was one of the previous year's national top eight. She was one of Japan's elite. She would not retreat or show fear. The magic she unleashed from her monocle—a rare sight among Devices—was one that could instantly reduce the temperature of a selected area within her vision to absolute zero.

"Satin Ice!"

A glaring light wrapped in a frigid, cutting shroud shot forth from the monocle. This magic's speciality was that its effect triggered instantly upon her focusing on a target. In other words, this magic travelled at what was effectively the speed of light. In a split-second, the temperature around Stella fell below freezing point right through to absolute zero. Even liquid nitrogen, which was well-known to be able to freeze objects instantly, reached only around minus 200 degrees Celsius. No human could remain unharmed when exposed to temperatures even lower than that. It would freeze them right down to the marrow—their heart having stopped long before that. No matter the terms in which one spoke of it—activation speed, range or stopping power—it was a first-rate ability. With it Mikoto could go toe-to-toe with any of the powerhouses in the Seven Stars Sword-Art Tournament.

That was true. Only one person—

"Empress Dress."

—the strongest fire user in the world, was exempt. Turning the entirety of the utterly frozen atmosphere into steam under extreme heat, she caused it to dissipate before the raiment of roiling flames that was clad about her.

"As I thought, that's how that would go, huh."

In truth, Mikoto had known it would turn out this way. Satin Ice was at its simplest the manipulation of temperature. Fire users on the other hand could raise temperatures, thus making it hard for this technique to beat them. If those two abilities were to clash, then the difference between victory and defeat lay with each individual's magic capacity. In this, the Crimson Princess Stella Vermillion was unmatched, and as such Mikoto stood no chance from the beginning.

But she had managed to slow her down, just for a moment.

And that's more than sufficient to fulfill my role!

"Tear my enemies asunder, Sphinx!"

"Gooohhhh!"

Having waited on the sidelines away from Stella, Rinna now took advantage of the momentary pause in her movements and struck out with King's Pressure.

Yes. One moment was enough. If she but stopped Stella for a moment, Rinna could land a clean hit with King's Pressure, rendering Stella immobile. The lion leapt into pursuit immediately, aiming for her head. Earlier, its blow had done no damage—that must have been quite a blow to its pride as the King of Beasts, for even without Rinna's orders it opened its mouth wide, preparing to crush Stella's head between its fanged jaws. Even Stella could not possibly emerged unharmed from being mauled by a lion as large as an elephant and empowered by magic as it was. If it went through, this would decide the battle.

But even as that faint expectation blossomed within Mikoto—

"Gaaaooohhh!!!"

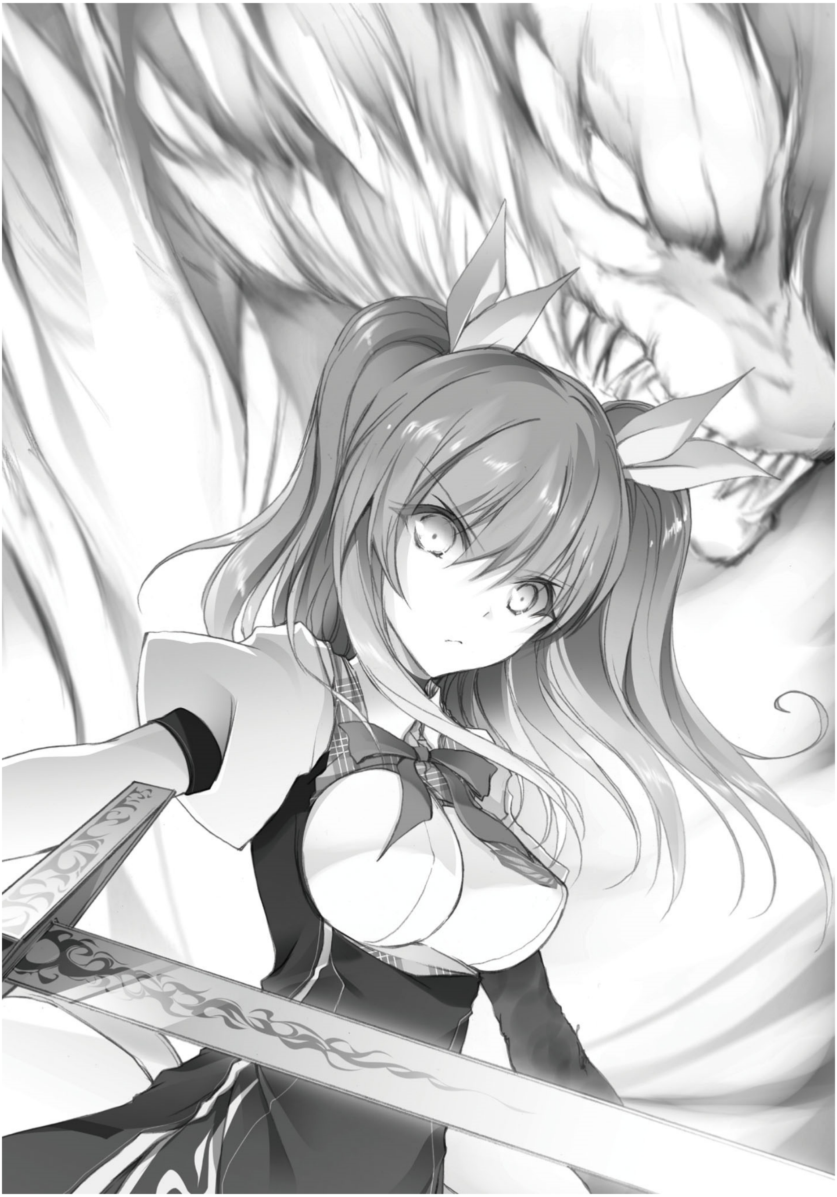
—Stella led out a sudden earthshaking roar aimed at the black lion the Beast Tamer commanded.

The lion came to a dead halt just as it was about to lay into her. As though it itself were affected by the King's Pressure.

"S-Sphinx!? What's wrong!?" Rinna berated the beast at its sudden disobedience. "Why did you cease!?"

But even so, the lion did not budge. Why? The answer was simple. Animals in the wild walked far closer with death than humans did. The strong devoured the weak. This was how that lion had lived long before Rinna had ever tamed it. Thus, it understood, could not help but recognize the vision that hovered behind that young woman.

That vision was of a towering, winged dragon.



The crimson-haired girl before it was by far a superior predator. There was no way it could intimidate her, for how could a mere cat frighten a dragon? Thus, upon meeting a predator whose capabilities far surpassed its own, wild animals would choose only to do one thing. Run.

"Meeeooowww—!"

"Eh!? Eek—!"

「Oh dear! What is this! The lion that should have been controlled by the Beast Tamer's collar of subordination, having been defeated by Stella's intimidation, has fled with its tail literally tucked between its legs, leaving its master in the lurch! And even now, Vermillion strikes at the defenseless Kazamatsuri-! 」

Once again, Stella brandished her sword in her right hand alone as she put her full weight into a diagonal slash. It was a broad stroke that relied on momentum alone, but having been thrown from atop the lion Rinna had landed on her rear. There was no way she could dodge that. The same heavy hand of Stella's that had taken Yui out in a single strike fell upon Rinna, hitting not only her but also collapsing a portion of the ring itself.

It was unmistakably a killing blow. But Stella did not count to two. The reason for that was a voice that spoke from within the dust cloud churned up by that explosive impact.

"Even in my dreams, Crimson Princess, I did not think that during these parlor games I would be forced to lean on mine favored right hand, and thus bring forth my sin-drenched, fell-branded knight—she whose form was blessed by powers dark: the Sealing Arts of Accursed King!"

"My lady means to say 'Thanks, Charlotte, you saved me!' No, no My Lady, you need not thank me. I am your personal maid, and also your sword and shield."

As the wind carried the dust away, it gradually ceased to veil the eyes, and what had transpired in the ring became clear to all. Stella's blade had failed to reach Rinna. The ground beneath her feet broken and cracked, the apron-clad maid Charlotte Cordé stood between Stella and her master…

…having stopped *Lævateinn* with but a single index finger.

Part 5

「Wh-What, this is bad! A Blazer from within the stands has stepped in, coming to Kazamatsuri's aid! 」

「Isn't that the maid that's always with her? 」

「It's a foul! Ref, call it!」

The sudden entrance of the the stoic maid threw the entire dome into an uproar. Once the referee halted the match, they would then await the judgement of the steering committee. This was procedure, but—

「Wh-What is going on here?」 The commentator cried out disbelievingly. 「The referee has not stopped the match!」

But there was a reason for this, of course.

「Of course. There weren't any rules being broken, anyway.」

「Muroto-pro, how is that?」

「Look at that girl's neck.」

Even as he said this, the Dome's cameras zoomed in on Charlotte's neck, and as that image was broadcasted on the giant monitors in the Dome, everyone understood what Muroto had meant.

「Th-That's indeed the same collar of subordination that the lion the Beast Tamer rode wore! Then that means…!」

「Yes. And like that lion, that girl has become the Device of the Beast Tamer, the Blazer that controls others. As such, there was no reason to stop the match.」

「Well, the role of referee is taken up by experienced mage-knights. They rarely miss such a thing.」

In the first place, Blazers were capable of detecting the ambient magic surrounding an object. Rinna's magic permeated Charlotte, a non-Blazer, just as it had the lion. So even without having to look at her collar, Stella knew that she was one of the Beast Tamer's chess pieces.

"I see… I thought you weren't a normal maid, but to think that you were Rinna's real Device, her ace, huh."

"I am Charlotte Cordé. I shall be in your care from here on."

Flicking *Lævateinn* backwards with her index finger, she hitched up the edges of her skirt and curtsied, full of elegance and grace. But instead of returning the greeting—

"Save the pleasantries, if you please!"

—Stella brandished *Lævateinn*, once again striking at Charlotte.

"Bloom, Ichirin Junka!"

With a harsh, ringing clang, she once again stopped the blade with her opened hand. Was she made of steel? No, this was an act of magic. This was the ability that Charlotte could unleash thanks to Beast Tamer Rinna Kazamatsuri's Device, the collar of subordination, which could transform animals and non-Blazers into Blazers.

Stella saw through this in the two blows they had exchanged.

"Tch… it's like hitting steel. It looks like you blocked it with your bare hands, but if one looks closely, there is a one millimeter gap between your skin and the blade. So the ability that you are able to use under Rinna's influence is the projection of a defensive barrier."

"Very observant of you."

Charlotte praised her earnestly for having hit the mark. At the same time, the space between the blade and her hand glowed with peach-pink hue, forming a flower-shaped shield.

"You have good eyes, Crimson Princess, to have been able to see through my ability after only having gone two rounds with me. However, you were wrong about one thing."

"What would that be?"

"My Ichirin Junka is not an ability specialized in defense."

Then, repelling the blade she had parried using Ichirin Junka—

"Flower Blade—Ryuuzetsuran!"

A blade-like barrier formed in her two hands, and she let fly that blade toward Stella.

"Tch!"

Her stance broken as her blade was repelled, this was not an attack Stella could avoid normally. but in a flash of inspiration she did not seek to correct her stance but instead leaned further back into a backflip, evading Charlotte's slash.

She did not quite make it, however. The blade shallowly nicked her face—the skin that had withstood the chainsaw-shaped *Sweeping Centipede* without blemish. And Charlotte's onslaught did not stop there. Like a bloodhound in a frenzy she pursued Stella, who responded with a horizontal sweep of her blade, meaning to counter her with that.

Now, Charlotte could do two things in response. She could halt her advance to evade the blade, or she could halt her advance and use Ichirin Junkan to block it. Either way, she would have to stop—and this was enough for Stella.

However, Charlotte's response was literally one level above. She took flight.

She did not leap; instead, Ichirin Junkan had bloomed at her heels as she soared into the air. Now directly above Stella, the petals of that flower wrapped themselves about her right leg, and with an elegant flip she aimed an axe kick right for Stella's head. Having missed with her sweeping slash, Stella's right arm and blade were in an over-extended position, leaving her no time to bring them up to defend her head. Seeing no choice in the matter, she squeezed out what strength she could into the shoulder of her broken left arm, using her somewhat less damaged upper arm to take the brunt of the axe kick.

But this blow was even more brutal than the ones before it, easily snapping the bones of her upper arm.

"Kuh!"

"Do you now understand? Like this, the impenetrable toughness that yielded not an inch to your strike becomes a slender blade, and a hammer that strikes harder than any steel."

Charlotte said this even as Stella's faced wrenched from the agony of having her bones broken. This was why she was both Rinna's sword and shield.

But Stella was not the sort of woman to be tamed by one or two broken bones.

"Empress Dress!"

While that was a mighty blow, Charlotte had made a poor move. Using close-combat maneuvers on Stella that involved bodily contact was close to suicidal. Summoning the fiery raiment about herself, she raised its output to the maximum. The flames ran up her forearm and onto Charlotte's leg, and then her whole body was aflame. Stella's flames too were magical, and they would not abate unless she dismissed them, or was herself dismissed from life.

Thus, it was a decisive error for an opponent to allow themselves to catch on fire at her hands. And yet—

…It's not working!?

—this logic fell flat in the face of Charlotte. Despite being shrouded in the roaring flames, her stoic mask did not break. Her barrier did not merely shield her from impact, but was also her mighty aegis against heat and electricity. Wrapped around her whole body as it was, it completely shut out the extreme temperatures of the Empress Dress.

"Ah. Additionally—"

Disregarding Stella's counterattack, Charlotte continued to pursue her own assault. Using Stella's left arm as a platform, she launched herself into the air.

"I am also her gun."

Ichirin Junka materialized as tens of long, sleek blades that she gripped between her fingers in a fan shape before hurling them at Stella.

She's using her barrier like throwing stars…!

She had already experienced the keenness of her barrier first hand. It would be troublesome if she was hit by them.

"Yaaaaah!"

Judging thus, she swung *Lævateinn* with all her might, blasting the hail of shurikens away with the force of a sonic boom, swirling up a gale like with a giant fan.

What a terrifying sword-arm. That strike was an imposing sight. But then something happened that was outside Stella's expectations.

Around ten or so of those blades, sent flying every which way, were now streaking towards the stands.

Part 6

「U, uwaaaa! This is bad! Stray shots incoming!」

「Everyone, run!」

Many rose from their seats at the sight of the incoming projectiles. This was a natural reaction; after all, none of the audience members who did not possess magic could stand against Ichirin Junka, that had even been able to wound someone guarded by such powerful magic as Stella was.

「Please do not leave your seats.」

A commanding voice rang out, stopping those who had stood.

「You would be in more danger if you moved.」

The Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival was an event that showcased modern magicians wielding supernatural power. There were already measures in place to ensure the crowd's safety and eliminate. There were powerful mage-knights waiting in the wings all across the stands to shoot down such stray fire. And the one assigned to wait in the area about to be bombarded by Ichirin Junka was World Clock Kurono Shinguuji, the Director of Hagun Academy and A-Rank Mage-Knight.

Materializing the silver gun *Ennoia*, she leveled its barrel at the ten or so blades that were inbound.

"*Clock Draw.*"

A single gunshot rang out. Yes, only one—but it was sufficient to ensure that not a single blade reached the stands as they were all knocked clean out of the air.

「Eh!? What was that?」

「It's her trademark Clock Draw. Stopping time for an instant, she uses that time to pelt her target with a hail of bullets! Look at her feet!」

「Uwa, for real! Look at that mountain of casings!」

「Amazing!」

Kurono's brilliant technique met with applause from the stands, and in the midst of that clapping—

"As expected of the knight who was originally ranked third in the K.O.K. League, huh."

It was a gentle voice, and one that Kurono knew when she heard it. Turning her head, she laid eyes upon a black-haired young man approaching while himself clapping. It was the Worst One, Ikki Kurogane.

"Your skills haven't rusted at all since your days of active service."

"Ha. There's been no reason to become dull, that's all there is to it. This is part of our job as teachers after all."

With her reply, Ikki's friends too became aware of his return.

"Ikki!"

"O-Onii-sama! How are your injuries?"

"I'm fine now, Shizuku. The doctor at the infirmary used magic to patch up my wounds earlier."

"You didn't use a Capsule, but got people to heal you with magic?" Kiriko pursed her lips, as though sulking. "You could have just asked, and I would have done that for you."

Ikki scratched his head uneasily.

"Well, you still have a match later, Yakushi-san. I couldn't possibly ask you for a favor like that."

As much as she thought of herself as a doctor before she was a knight, it went against all common logic for a knight before a match to use magic willy-nilly for their own personal use.

"But Onii-sama, didn't you use Ittou Shura during your match? Doesn't it hurt just standing up?"

"Well, I can't say it isn't difficult, but I'm more concerned about this match. I'd feel worse just lying there."

So saying, he made his way next to Kurono before looking down at the ring. At the match his sweetheart, who had promised to meet him in the finals, was in. To feel that he had to watch was normal. Understanding her brother's feelings, Shizuku held her words of concern for his health in and did not push him.

"By the way, Kurogane, what do you think of the match so far?"

"Well, it all looks to have gone as expected right now. Icy Laughter was always of opposing elements with Stella, and was no match magically. And while Reflectors are indeed the bane of power types like Stella, she isn't the sort of knight who would be pinned down by only one technique. Nonetheless...."

As he replied, his eyes drifted over to the outskirts of the ring, where the Puppeteer Reisen Hiraga stood, spookily unmoving, keeping his distance from Stella.

"It seems it might get messy from here—that man is giving off an ominous aura. I wouldn't claim to know what he is doing, but I sense an uncanny amount of focus. Taking him down before he finishes whatever he is preparing for would be best."

Everyone present would agree with Ikki. They could all feel Reisen's eerie aura. But that was not all. From their birds-eye vantage point, one could see all the combatants' movements. It was clear as day that, Mikoto Tsuruya included, the Akatsuki camp were all moving to defend him. He was their ace, no doubt about it. In that case, it was best to nip his plan in the bud as soon as possible. This was the unspoken consensus of all present, and it was surely on Stella's mind as well.

"However, that looks to be difficult."

"I wonder what you mean by that, Director?"

Kurono pointed in response to Arisuin's question.

"Look."

There, at the edge of the stands, was a glimmering object embedded deep into the concrete.

It was one of the Ichirin Junka blades that she had shot down using Clock Draw.

"I brought it down in a spot where no one is, but look. There's not a scratch on it—that's unnatural toughness. I haven't ever met a barrier user this good, not even in the K.O.K. A-League. This might be Vermillion we speak of, but breaking through that with just her right hand is going to be difficult… in fact, that maid may even be able to block Vermillion's strongest attack—Katharterio Salamandra."

Kurono's unease was, unfortunately, right on the mark.

Part 7

「Vermillion attacks again and again, but to no avail! She is unable to break through the frighteningly redoubtable defenses of Beast Tamer Rinna Kazamatsuri's ace, Charlotte Cordé! In fact, Cordé's counterattacks are blunting her assault bit by bit!」

「If her left arm were usable, she could probably go up against that barrier, but she can't use it to hold her sword right now. The Crimson Princess is in a tough spot.」

Just as the commentator and analyst had said, Stella's attacks had so far failed to make a dent in Ichirin Junka's guard. On the other hand, Charlotte's consistent counterattacks were wearing her down. Anyone could see that the match was not going well for her. Stella's shoulders drooped as she sighed.

"My, my… you really are outrageously tough. All those slashes did nothing whatsoever. It seems that as expected, nothing will come of using one hand."

Unproductive actions sapped the spirit as much if not more than the body, and an exhausted spirit lacked strength. At Stella's weak tone, Charlotte felt sure that the battle was within her grasp. A little more. Just a little more, and this knight would fall. There was no need to wait till the Puppeteer's Noble Art was ready.

"Of course. Protecting my lady is the reason for my existence—the reason why I am both sword and shield. Your sword will not reach her, Crimson Princess. As long as I am here, as long as I draw breath, you will not singe a hair on her head."

"Such loyalty. I don't dislike that."

Charlotte did not respond to Stella's praise. Even if she had said nothing, Charlotte understood that her loyalty was a feeling that wouldn't lose out to anything else in the world. She had sworn to live for that adorable young girl, Rinna Kazamatsuri, ever since the day Rinna had picked her out of that garbage dump. She would give everything, from the crown of her head to the soles of her feet, for Rinna. And she had given her all. Never leaving that girl's side, she swept all danger away from her. If she wished for a cat, she would be that cat. If she wished for a dog, she would be that dog. Having done that much, she had been frustrated to no end when Rinna had began to keep Sphinx as a pet, so much so that she had wanted to stew it for dinner.

But then, the young mistress said to me, "You should just be a human being. I would be quite troubled if my right hand were a cat, so please, stop eating cat food on all fours."

So saying, she had returned to Charlotte the clothes she had discarded in order to become a cat.

Ahh, my lady, my lady! How gentle you are!

To think that Rinna would treasure her so greatly—she, who was so lowborn as to be no better than a dog or a cat. That was why she gave her all, in order to repay her expectations. Her loyalty was firm as a rock—it would not lose. She would not lose.

This was her belief. This was her pride.

"Nonetheless… I'm sorry, but it's impossible for you."

So said the red-headed knight facing her. It was almost as if she was being pitied.

"What do you mean, impossible?"

"You won't be able to protect your master."

Charlotte laughed at Stella.

"Now that's odd. You say such things, and yet you were powerless against my Ichirin Junka. You admitted it yourself that there was nothing you could do, did you not? To speak so brazenly now without any grounds for it cannot be called anything but unseemly, no?"

"My, you seem to have forgotten something important, Miss Maid. I said that I could do nothing… with only one hand, that is."

In that instant, the Empress Dress that shrouded her suddenly began exhibiting strange behavior, concentrating its flame around a single point—her left arm, that had been broken and immobilized by Yui's Total Reflect.

What is she doing?

Charlotte could not comprehend the meaning behind Stella's actions.

But soon, something even further from her understanding would occur. Somehow, in that searing heat, that arm that should have been shattered began to move!

"Wha—!"

The twisted arm regained its former straightness; crushed fingers formed a fist, and then released it. And again. And again.

The flames then dissipated, and Stella held *Lævateinn* in her once-broken left hand. A greatsword like that, always having meant to be wielded in two hands, was now so wielded. It shouldn't have been possible with a broken arm. That she could, meant that she had healed that arm.

And yet a fire user like Stella could not use healing magic. So how —

Something flashed across Charlotte's mind, something reckless, incoherent. Her voice was almost pained.

"Could… could it be that you used your fires to melt and weld your broken bones back together…!?"

Stella did not reply. She merely smiled in triumph. That smile said it all. It was exactly that—she had melted down the calcium in her broken bones and put them back together. And now with both her hands restored to her, she was no longer held back by anything.

"Pierce the heavens, O you fires of purgatory—"

Holding her sword aloft, she activated her mightiest Noble Art. A pillar of crimson fire burst forth from Lævateinn, searing through the sky, its incomparable flame turning blue even as it grew ever hotter and hotter, before finally losing all coloration—becoming light. A blade of light fifty meters long, with which to mercilessly incinerate all in its path.

"So what will you do, Miss Maid? My Katharterio Salamandra is about to cut down your master behind you. You are not a representative—I will not pursue you if you flee, you know?"

"Tch!"

The pressure that Stella's words exuded weighed heavily on Charlotte's back. She knew. This was her final warning. If she did not remove herself, the Crimson Princess would bring that holy blade of light, forged of her unnatural birth-right of magic, to bear on her without holding back.

She was powerless before something of that order. But—

"Foolishness!"

She did not retreat. Standing in front of Rinna to shield her, she declared her resolve.

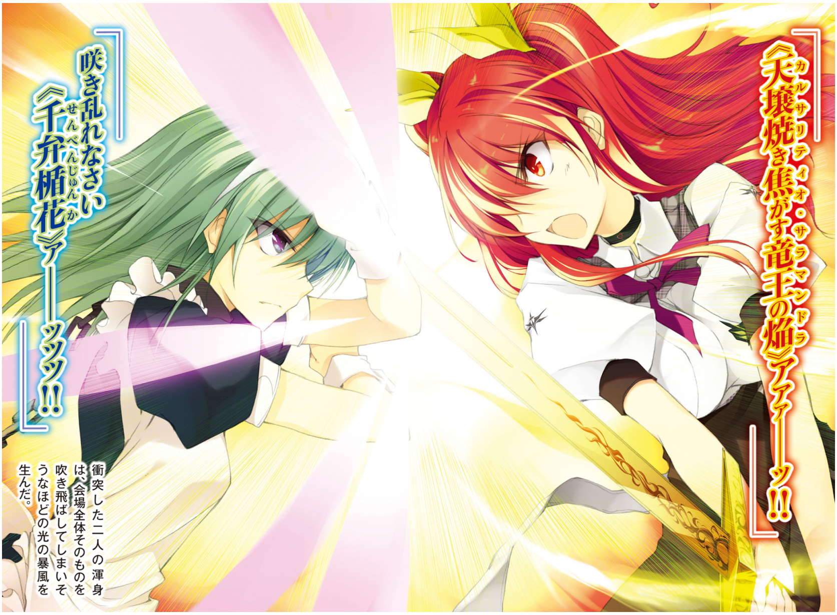
"I said it before. You shall not touch her!"

"Very good!"

Like two Western gunmen at high noon, they moved as one.

"*Katharterio Salamandra!*"

"Bloom wildly—*Senben Junka!*"[1]


『《天壌焼き焦がす竜王の焔》（カルサリティオ・サラマンドラ）アァァ――ッ!!』
『咲き乱れなさい《千弁楯花》（せんべんじゅんか）ア――ッツツ!!』
衝突した二人の渾身は、会場全体そのものを吹き飛ばしてしまいそうなほどの光の暴風を生んだ。

Stella let fly her blade of light and heat to slice Charlotte and Rinna behind her clean in twain. Charlotte responded, pouring all her magic power into an impregnable shield the likes of which surpassed Ichirin Junka by three orders of magnitude in order to protect her master.

Their strikes met—

—and a raging storm of light was born, as though to sweep everything in the Dome away in its wake.

Part 8

"Haaaaaa!"

"Aaaaaaahhh!"

「Cordé's shield, which has withstood Vermillion's repeated attacks up till now, now meets the unbridled fury of Vermillion's strongest Noble Art in the middle of the ring! These fierce magics blow wildly about the Dome, the might of their flowing magic evident! The keenest spear and the hardest shield battle it out furiously, neither yielding an inch… victory lies in the balance still!」

And yet, there existed no such equality between spear and shield in real life. A spear that pierced all could not coexist with a shield that blocked all. One must triumph. And as though to prove that point, the force behind that nimbus of light began to destroy that fine balance.

It's…heavy… so hot….

The one being driven back was Charlotte. The thousand petaled Senben Junka was starting to wither and shed petals under the relentless push of Katharterio Salamandra. And as the shield began to fail, so too did its ability to block out the heat given off by that Noble Art. With sickening gurgles, the ground began to melt and bubble. Skin and hair began to darken and char. Despite the fact that her shield was holding against the blade itself, the energy it was giving off had that kind of power.

What outrageous strength.

At this rate….

Her shield would be broken through. Charlotte cried out, in a last-ditch effort to protect her master.

"My Lady! Retreat!"

But—

"I refuse."

Her master, Beast Tamer Rinna Kazamatsuri, put her arms around her waist from behind, leaning into her back.

"M-My Lady, what are you doing!?"

Charlotte's normally well-schooled expression caved way to distress at her master's incomprehensible actions. Rinna on the other hand just gave a confident grin.

"I said 'I refuse'. My loyal retainer, there is no need to flee. For the one standing before me Charlotte Cordé, my ablest servant, my right hand of darkest night, who has sworn fealty to me. You shall not fall—am I wrong?"

And she held her closer still. Through the contact she could feel that warmth, that absolute trust.

"...Yes, my liege!"

From her soul she poured forth more power. With a wailing sound, the luster returned to the crumbling Senben Junka. Petals that had wilted under the searing light stood strong again, once more shutting out its heat. And with that at last, despite her ragged state, Charlotte's Senben Junka repelled the Crimson Princess' Noble Art.

「And... Senben Junka triumphs! It barely manages to hold against the strongest sword, A-Rank Knight Stella Vermillion's Katharterio Salamandra!」

"Ugh...."

Sweat beading down her face, Charlotte fell to her knees, her hands barely holding her up. Her hair was frazzled and fried. Her shoulders ached, and her breaths came in ragged pants. She was at her limit. But even so—

I... was able to protect—

Yes—she had successfully defended her master from the brunt of Stella Vermillion's ace in the hole. Feeling her master's warmth and heartbeat behind her brought a smile to her lips. She had fulfilled her master's wishes. There could be no greater joy than that. It was an indescribable thing, that sense of achievement, that euphoria.

But that would turn to blackest despair in an instant.

"Katharterio Salamandra."

"It...can't be...."

Charlotte saw it.

The flame-haired knight produced a second blade of light not in the least inferior to the first in overwhelming might without wasting another breath, before swinging it downwards.

She can launch consecutive attacks of such power... so quickly!?

"That's why I said that it's impossible for you."

In all honesty, Stella had felt right from the start that it would have been difficult to break Charlotte's defense in a single blow. But what did that matter? If one strike was not enough, then she would just strike out with two, three strikes, one after the other. The Crimson

Princess did, after all, have enough to spare to launch twelve such consecutive attacks of Katharterio Salamandra.

On the other hand, Charlotte could not even squeeze out a single drop of mana more.

"Charlotte!"

"My… Lady—"

Unable to resist, she was devoured by a nimbus of dragonflame.

Part 9

「It's… it's a direct hit! Having been at her wits' end defending against one strike from Katharterio Salamandra, Cordé was naturally unable to do anything about consecutive attacks from the same! Together with the Beast Tamer, she collapses powerlessly!」

「I don't think they will get up again. Even if they were to do so, the two of them would be in no shape to fight in the first place—it took all they had just to block that first blow.」

"And that's the second."

Having shattered Charlotte's strongest shield with ease, Stella now turned her attention to Icy Laughter and the Puppeteer as the countdown finished. The shield that lay between them and Stella's onslaught was no more. There was nowhere to run. Once the Puppeteer, who still had that eerie air about him, was defeated this match would be over.

"Looks like you didn't make it."

Stella spoke softly, and Puppeteer Reisen Hiraga replied with a grin that nearly split his face from cheek to cheek.

"No? Cordé-san did an exemplary job. Thanks to her, my preparations have all been completed."

Then it happened. A shadow was cast over the length of the Dome.

「Eh? Did the sky suddenly darken?」

「You're kidding! I didn't bring an umbrella… wait, what's that!?」

One after the other, people began exclaiming as they looked up at the darkened sky. This was unavoidable, for the shadows which had darkened the skies had not been cast by clouds, but by rubble that were even now falling from on high, falling into the ring one by one as though attracted by some unnamed force.

「Wh, what is this!? All of a sudden, buildings, cars, even trains are starting to drop into the ring! Were they carried in by a tornado!?」

No. Indeed, the amount and content of the rubble was akin to that of a tornado had it swept through a town, but had it been a natural phenomenon, then such an unnatural occurrence as not having a single piece of rubble land in the stands but instead gathering in the ring would not have happened.

This was the work of man. Specifically, the work of the Pierrot who laughed mockingly at the chaos sowed throughout the Dome—the work of none other than Reisen Hiraga. Stretching his strings out beyond the Dome grounds, he had picked up the detritus along the coastline, scrapped cars and even unmanned trains, bringing them here into the ring.

For what purpose? This would become clear soon enough.

「Wh-What!? The mountain of rubble that fell from the skies is are now merging! This shape… it's a human!? It's taking human shape! The mass of rubble is combining as though attracted by a magnet, and is forming the shape of a giant human! 」

That's…!

Ikki and Stella, from their respective places in the stands and in the ring, recognized this. They had seen it before, on that rainy day in Okutama!

That Noble Art that used string to piece together inanimate objects into a giant string puppet—

"*Deus Ex Machina*. Heh, it's like a giant robot. Cool, isn't it?"

Fully formed, the puppet of rubble stood fifty meters tall—this was Puppeteer Reisen Hiraga's ace.

Part 10

Gazing up at the giant of rubble that had appeared in the ring, Stella clicked her tongue.

"As I thought. I had suspected as much since a while back… that was you back there at the training camp."

"Hahaha, you took good care of my puppets then."

Hiraga's voice rang out from somewhere inside the rubble giant. At some point in the formation of the rubble, he had entered therein. Indeed, this puppet that was controlled from within was just like a mecha[2].

"Raikiri gave me a hard time of it then, but Deus Ex Machina is definitely different from those piles of mud. Even the Crimson Princess would not be able to withstand a single strike with such mass behind it!"

And so Reisen's fully-formed ace began its attack on Stella, wielding in the twisted combination of concrete and steel pipe that was its left arm eight train cars lashed together to form a whip, swinging it down upon the crimson knight in the ring. The power of that blow was such that it did not merely stop at crushing a single human, smashing the ring itself and shaking the Dome to its very foundations.

「Too strong! The ring is shattered by the train-whip of Deus Ex Machina! One quarter of it has been completely blown away, raising an impressive dust cloud! Is Vermillion alright!? 」

She couldn't be. Being made of stainless steel, the train cars were somewhat lighter—but they nonetheless weighed in the tons. One lash from such a whip would reduce a human to unrecognizable bits. However—

「Certainly, I would be done for if that were to hit me. But that whip of your puppet's is dull. It won't hit me at all!」

At that moment, a bolt of red light pierced through the smoke screen of dust—none other than Stella Vermillion, the knight clad in flames. She had evaded the train-whip with ease, and riding the dust cloud created by the impact she landed with one great leap upon the right arm of the train-wielding Deus Ex Machina, dashing upwards towards its shoulder in one go—and in one strike she cleaved off its head, an amalgamation of a heavy truck core and assorted surrounding detritus.

Stricken from its roots, the head plummeted to the ground, raising a din of clanking metal as it splintered like glass—truck, traffic light, empty propane gas cylinders and all. Stella landed amid the rubble as they were pathetically strewn about.

"This is the puppet that you spent so much time trying to make while I was fighting that maid, but I'll return it to the scrapheap in just a minute."

Stella declared so with a confident grin. This was her victory.

"Haha, hahaha!"

Reisen laughed mockingly.

"What's so funny?"

"No, it's nothing. I simply think you are terribly mistaken. Deus Ex Machina was ready long before you had even begun to fight with Cordé-san. What I mainly took that time to prepare, was another puppet."

At that very moment, Stella, who had been assured of her victory, felt a pressure send a shiver up her spine. Was it the pressure of the puppeteer within that Deus Ex Machina? No. This was different. This pressure came from behind, not in front of her.

What's this feeling—?

She couldn't tell, but one thing was for sure.

—Danger!

Following her intuition, she kicked off the ground with all her might, propelling herself forward without any preparation, just as the place she had previously been standing was frozen.

"This power is…!"

There was only one person here who could cause all the moisture in the air to freeze, creating that blooming flower of ice.

"Icy Laughter's Satin Ice… tch!"

There, in the direction to which Stella had felt that shiver, was the stoically still Mikoto Tsuruya. And her eyes of death were alight with a flame of green-white magic, unlike anything Stella had seen from her previously.

Part 11

The light in Mikoto's eyes instantly turned to magic. Along her line of sight, sword-like pillars of ice burst out along the ground as they crossed the space between her and Stella, as though she intended to freeze it all.

「Once again, Tsuruya goes on the offensive, launching attack after attack of Satin Ice at Vermillion, who for her part is staying out of Tsuruya's vision! The Crimson Princess's mobility, too, is top-notch! Yet, why is she dodging this desperately? Satin Ice was easy meat for Empress Dress previously!」

「It's… not the same as before. The technique itself is several times stronger. See, as far as I know, Icy Laughter is only able to freeze a spherical space about 3 meters in diameter at the focal point of her vision. But right now, she is freezing everything in sight. The power of her Noble Art is now on a whole new level. That she had been hiding such an ace up her sleeve… shocking. A Noble Art like this might just be able to freeze the Crimson Princess's flames!」

Even as Muroto spoke thus, the chance Mikoto had been waiting for arrived. Stella had been dodging with swift steps, but she was hard-pressed to continue dodging a Noble Art that could reach lightspeed. The more she dodged desperately, the more her situational awareness waned, till she was hemmed in on either side by the walls of ice created by Satin Ice.

「Oh my! Stella has been pressed into a cul-de-sac even as we speak! Is it all over now?」

Locking on to Stella, cut off from all escape routes, the light of Absolute Zero burst forth.

But Stella was not one to go down without a fight.

"Haaaa!"

Shrouding *Lævateinn* in her Empress Dress, she created a blade of fire that hewed the gaze of Hades aside.

「Sh-She repelled it with her sword! As expected, the Crimson Princess will not go down so easily!」

「Nonetheless, look at her Device—!」

「Eh…?」

As they gazed upon *Lævateinn* at Muroto's cue, the commentator and the audience were both stunned into silence.

「Th-This…! What is this? Vermillion's Device, *Lævateinn*… it's frozen!」

「Hey, hey now, are you serious!?」

Exclamations of astonishment filled the Dome stands. The Device of a fire user could be said to be like the core of a sun, and to freeze something of such singularly high temperatures was something wholly out of the ordinary. Stella herself was quite shaken by this turn of events.

You're kidding….

Encircling the blade with flames immediately, she attempted to defrost it—

「It's… it's not working! The ice has not melted one bit despite enduring Stella's fire! What power! 」

…For my flames to be unable to melt it…!

Even as she felt herself break into a cold sweat, she gave the god of death before her a sharp look.

"You're an unexpectedly horrible person, Tsuruya-san, to have hidden such power."

Her sardonic tone belied genuine praise, but Mikoto did not react to it. Mikoto did not need the praises of an enemy… or so Stella thought at first.

Looking at her expression, Stella felt something was off. She thought that Mikoto would flash a confident smile at having one-upped her unaware opponent with her power… but she didn't. There was no light in her eyes. No strength holding her body up. A sickly aura surrounded her.

It was like… yes, she was just like a puppet….

"What I mainly took that time to prepare, was another puppet."

She realized a horrifying possibility.

"Hiraga, you can't have—!"

"Heh heh heh. Yes, I did."

And she was right. When Reisen Hiraga had spoken of 'another puppet' earlier, he had referred to Mikoto Tsuruya, who had been standing next to him the whole time. While Stella had been occupied with Charlotte, and unbeknownst even to Mikoto herself, Reisen's Device, Black Widow, had entered through her ear, infiltrating her brain and nervous system—seizing control of her body away from her and using her as his puppet.

This was Puppeteer Reisen Hiraga's true ace.

"*Marionette*. This technique is hardly sophisticated, but by that right it is also powerful."

When under the effect of Marionette, one did not merely become a pitiable living puppet. By encroaching directly on the brain and taking control of the electrical signals it could send, Reisen could easily remove certain things—such as a human's instinct to protect themselves, and thus forcefully bring forth the true limit of that person's ability. This was the reason for the immense power-up that Mikoto had gained.

"But most regrettably, humans cannot withstand their own full power."

Reisen said that softly, and as if in response, blood began to ooze out of Mikoto's eyes.

"Tsuruya-san…!"

"If you continue this pointless struggle, why, her eyes might just burst. Well, at this point she could still be healed easily, but my strings run deep into her brain. She was a complete outsider, with nothing at all to do with the feud between us and you… such a beautiful girl. Such a long life ahead. Don't you think it would be a pity for her to live as a vegetable for the rest of it?"

"Are you threatening me?"

"Exactly."

"Your allies, at least, put their pride on the line to fight me fair and square. You don't intend to do the same, do you?"

"No, not at all."

"…Tch…!"

Stella bit her lip, hard. She knew it now. This man, Reisen Hiraga, was different from Yui and the others. He was pure evil.

Stella was royalty. She knew that morality was a frail and malleable thing. If viewed from a different angle, Rebellion's goal of creating a utopia for Blazers could be taken as 'good'. The definition of 'evil' and 'evil people' too, only amounted to this much.

But this Pierrot was different. Delighting in the pain of others, drawing amusement from their suffering—he was truly evil. Absolutely so.

"I believe you are mistaken. We are not here in the name of glory. Victory is all we desire. It is a second-rate assassin who haggles over the means. A professional fulfills his orders. Thus, I do not falter. I do not hesitate. I show no quarter. And now that you understand this sufficiently, Crimson Princess… What. Will. You. Do?"

His whispers could not hide their black joy, and the very sound of it lit a fire in Stella's belly that could roil up at any moment. But no matter what she did…she didn't have any other choice.

"Vulgar cur."

She spat out that insult, and without a second thought discarded Lævateinn. It landed on the ground of the ring with a clatter—

"Hyaaaaa!"

—just as Deus Ex Machina's whip struck Stella full-on.

Part 12

All according to plan.

As Deus Ex Machina's train-whip rained blow after blow on Stella, who having discarded her sword was now standing still in the ring, the Puppeteer within, Reisen Hiraga, was assured of his victory. Indeed, it would be more accurate to say that he had been sure of his victory ever since the match had begun. When she had suggested that reckless penalty, luring Akatsuki's members out into the ring, he had immediately realized that her intention was to get revenge for their past attack on Hagun Academy.

Facing an uphill battle knowingly for the sake of her friends who were injured. Hehe, how beautiful. That good heart of hers is worth respect.

That proud spirit and gentle soul was—

—*So easy to control.*

Funnily enough, he could sway her as he wished without the use of his threads. Only words had been necessary. Such a kind person, surely, could never sacrifice an innocent like Mikoto Tsuruya in order to further her own ends. Using Mikoto as a hostage, he would make Stella cast her sword aside and lose the will the fight—this had been the scenario written in his mind ever since the match began. And Stella had been ensnared by his plot.

「Deus Ex Machina's train whip strikes the ground again and again! Is Vermillion alright? The dust cloud being churned up is making the situation in the ring hard to see! Just as inexplicably, Vermillion let go of her sword just before Hiraga started his assault! Just what does she intend to do, letting go of her sword like that?」

「Whatever she intends, this situation is dangerous.」

The umpires around the ring seemed to feel the same way—they were looking for an opening to stop the match. Seeing the surrounding circumstances as they were, Reisen swung once more and then stopped. He had felt the sensation of the train striking flesh through the strings that ran throughout every cranny of the rubble giant. She could not have been dodging like she had previously. Thus, this much was enough. He had not intended to kill her, in any case. If the umpires saw Stella collapsed and splayed out on the ring floor, they would stop the match for sure.

So he thought, and with him staying his hand the dust cloud began to dissipate.

「The dust settles… what has happened to Vermillion—!?」

The commentator seemed to be wondering whether she was alright, but stopped short—and in the next moment every spectator was agape in shock, the world standing still as they forgot to breathe.

Why? Was it because of the copious amount of blood flowing from a hollowed-out crater in the ring? No. It was because of the one atop that pool of blood: though it flowed in rivulets down her head, Stella was unbowed, standing ramrod straight as she glared at Deus Ex Machina.

「Unbelievable! Vermillion! She neither avoids nor defends, but takes that onslaught without moving from her spot! Her endurance is on a whole new level!」

The blows had shattered the ring and upturned the soil underneath, but Stella's endurance was such that she did not flinch at all. Even Reisen found himself flabbergasted.

"You're stupidly tough. But this match has been decided, so why won't you lie down quietly?"

His voice sounded a little bored. Stella cocked her head to one side.

"Decided? What are you saying?"

"What are *you* saying? Did you not drop your sword?"

Yes. The match had been decided there and then. Stella could not do anything with Mikoto as his hostage. That was the scenario.

But that was merely the conclusion that Reisen had come to after having measured Stella Vermillion as a knight. A little time passed before Stella seemed to nod her head in understanding—

"You idi~ot."

Her bloodstained face warped into a smile, mocking him from the bottom of her heart. Her discarding of her blade had not been a show of surrender in the face of Reisen's threats with Mikoto as his hostage.

"I let go of my sword, my soul as a knight, only because I did not wish to cut a dog such as you down with it. A knight's sword is meant for honorable battle—my soul would never forgive it if I were to use it on a man like you. I didn't want to use this technique, since it requires the support of other people. But I'll show it to you as a special treat."

As she spoke, everyone saw it, including Reisen himself. Something that up till now only a perceptive animal could see: the image of that crimson dragon of flame, towering over the rubble giant. As a manifestation of the aura of dominance that Stella exuded, it did not truly exist. But for the buildup of Stella's magic to exude such a pressure enough to materialize such a vision at all, the technique could not be something pedestrian.

"Since Tsuruya-san and the others are here, I will only use the flat of my sword. So go in peace—and to hell with you!"

Stella took in a deep breath, and Reisen felt his pulse quicken sharply. His underworld-nurtured instincts warned him of danger—if she was allowed to finish what she was doing now, things would get ugly. He followed them without hesitation.

"Marionette!"

Through the cords of Black Widow that he had burrowed into Mikoto's brain, he gave the order to use Satin Ice. This order was carried out swiftly, and thus controlled the eyes of Icy Laughter froze Stella solid.

But the dragon's pulse did not cease. Within that frozen coffin, crimson eyes blazed with a fury. The dragon roared.

"*Bahamut Howl*[3]*!*"

Then color fled from the world. No, it was beyond the ability of man to perceive color, not within this whirlwind of light and flame. Surging forth from Stella in every direction and none all at once it swallowed Deus Ex Machina, the marionette Mikoto, and at last the whole ring, stopping just short of the audience as an invisible wall halted its advance, before soaring upwards, searing through the skies in a pillar of glory.

Twenty seconds passed—and when the burning light, so bright one could not gaze upon it, faded, there was nothing left. The ring itself had melted, its turf turned to ashes, its soil blasted and blackened, like the wastelands of a primordial earth.

At ground zero, Deus Ex Machina looked much the worse for wear: its body of slurry and concrete had all but sloughed away in melting puddles, leaving naught but a charred skeleton of metal, which collapsed to the ground, clattering bonelessly as it did so.

Part 13

Reisen noted the shallowness in his thinking ruefully as he fell together with the charred rubble.

"My, my. This was a failure, huh?"

That warcry, that power from earlier had enveloped the entire ring. If she had used it from the start, the match would have ended right there and then. In other words, had she so wished, she had the ability to one-sidedly end the match. She did not do so, however, and there was a single reason as to why: Bahamut Howl was too powerful. Its area of effect was not limited to the 100-meter-wide ring. It had the power to consume the whole Bay Dome, and even the surrounding ghost town. Such a thing should not have been used even in Illusory Form, since Illusory Form was only harmless to humans, but the uncontrollable heat from that technique would have completely destroyed the surroundings.

In order to use it, she required the aforementioned 'support' in order to keep her power within the ring. Indeed, this was a technique that from its inception required the help of others. To use it in a battle that prided itself on honorable one-on-one combat was not her style. Hence, she had not relied on it, choosing to continue fighting without relying on the aid of others.

But Reisen himself had flown in the face of that style, crossing the line by using Marionette in order to threaten her. The moment that had happened, this match had ceased to be a fight in Stella's eyes: it had become pest extermination.

Freeing her from the limitations of a duel… I definitely shouldn't have *done that.*

He understood too well the reason for his defeat.

Just then, a shadow loomed over him. He looked up. Stella was looking down at him, her face silhouetted against the clear summer sky, the clouds all but having been blown away by the storm. Her eyes were filled with contempt, as though she had seen some sort of garbage.

He knew well the reason why. Seeing his body, she must have felt disgusted. For that body of his that had collapsed on the ground was not that of a human. It was a robotic puppet made of metal and wood.

Yes. The person named the Perriot, Reisen Hiraga, had never once existed. He was nothing but a puppet controlled by the most skilled Puppeteer in Rebellion. A man like that, who could casually take hostages in a public arena, would never take part in a fair fight, let alone show up in person at the venue.

Stella seemed to have realized this somewhat as well. Her eyes bore no trace of surprise, only a certain distant coldness.

"It seems that you are not an opponent who would dance in the palm of my hand. This is your win-"

As he was about to give out some shallow praises, Stella crushed his blackened visage underfoot without hesitation. She had nothing to say to him, nor was she interested in hearing anything from him, and so she smashed him as one would an empty can. He was that insignificant a presence in her eyes. With that, there was only one person still standing in the ring. The fourth match of Block B, that had begun with the penalty Stella had suggested, was now ended.

Part 14

「What… what should we call this? Just as we thought that Stella, having discarded her blade, was on the receiving end of a beating, being beaten back into a corner, the light she released literally incinerated everything in the ring, leaving naught but her still standing! Even the referee lost consciousness after being caught up in the thick of it! To think she had hidden such an ace!」

「I wouldn't say she had hidden it, more that she hadn't wanted to use it.」

「What might you mean?」

「Looking at that technique, Bahamut Howl, it is merely the full-power release of magic power at one's upper ceiling of instantaneous output. For the benefit of the non-Blazers in the audience, it was akin to yelling out loud—hence the low, unstoppable execution timing and its high power. However, the more this is so, the less easy to control it becomes. The proof of this is that the referees were caught up in the blast, and if not for the barrier that the mage-knights positioned in the stands erected around the ring, the audience, and even the entire Bay Dome might have been blown away. It's an extremely dangerous technique. It is common sense among knights that such techniques that might affect bystanders should be restricted in their use. After all, they run counter to the essence of a knight—that those with power should protect those that do not possess it.」

「So she used it because she had been pushed into a corner?」

「No… that's probably wrong as well.」

Shaking his head, Muroto gazed down at the figure of the victor within the charred, blackened landscape with something akin to awe in his gaze—for he had been able to discern the true reason behind Stella's use of Bahamut Howl.

「That was probably just a test shot.」

「A test? What would she be testing?」

「The strength of those organizing this festival—in other words, she was ascertaining if this Festival would or would not collapse if she were to exert her full power. …Really, what an outrageous young lady. This has to be a first, testing the steering committee like that.」

This was indeed the truth. Saving one's strength out of concern for the surroundings and one's opponent was a habit that could only come of having been born with surpassing strength as Stella was. Having realized this, Nene Saikyou the Yaksha Princess had left her this advice: that just once, she should try discarding that concern at an early stage of the festival.

「Kuu-chan is at this Festival too. Her defenses aren't so weak that little kids need to worry or hold themselves back.」

And just as Nene had said, even Bahamut Howl, Stella's momentary release of her full power, had been unable to harm anyone in the stands in the least. The moment she had used it, a number of Blazers had moved to weave layer upon layer of defensive barriers. Their swift movements caused her to realize that her concern was unnecessary. They were practiced enough that they could tide over a little recklessness just fine—as expected of the knights of Japan, who boasted of standing at the top of the League.

But one thing was unexpected.

"To think that you were the first to make a move, Ouma."

Among those layered defenses, the swiftest had been the wall of wind that the Sword Emperor of Wind Ouma had conjured to blast Bahamut Howl up into the air. What were his intentions? While she could not claim to understand them, they did not leave her in a good mood. Was it because he had aided her? Was it because he had been able to perfectly seal her ability? Perhaps it was both. Thus Stella merely spared Ouma, who was looking down at her from the highest point in the stands, a single glance—

Well, whatever will be, will be.

—before turning away and departing the ruined ring slowly, her crimson hair billowing like a flame behind her.

Part 15

"Good work. As expected of our country's A-Rank Knight, to be able to withstand that level of power—that was truly splendid. I am much reassured to have a young man like you around."

Within the topmost VIP room in a corner of the stands, Bakuga Tsukikage, the director of Akatsuki Academy, applauded the young man dressed in casual Japanese-style clothes next to him. His applause of course was in response to Ouma having defended the audience from Stella's flames.

"But as a participant, you should conserve your strength. Even if you had not make a move, Shinguuji-kun would have had it well in hand."

Ouma did not even turn to face him as he replied.

"What-ifs are annoying. It would hardly be interesting if she were to conserve her strength yet again by being tied down by pointless concerns."

His razor-sharp eyes were fixed only upon the crimson knight below, and coincidentally, their gazes met as Stella looked up. A gaze like a keen blade, brimming with killing intent. Despite her bitter defeat to him before, her eyes had no fear in them—instead, the very spirit of confidence and strength shined from within.

Seeing that, Ouma smiled in spite of himself.

"How my heart sings."

Her aura was different from before. She must have spent that one week most productively…

…In order to best me.

That was good. The Crimson Princess had to aim for such heights. Her talent could never blossom if she merely tested herself against opponents of such low caliber as the Worst One. Defeating her meant nothing if she aimed so low. That was not the outcome Ouma desired.

Look at me. Aim for me. This is, after all, also for your own sake….

Thus, though Mikoto Tsuruya had been aided by three members of Akatsuki due to Stella's suggestion of a four-on-one match for the fourth match of Block B, Stella defeated them in one fell swoop. Having been caught up in the swell of her overwhelming might, the referee had lost consciousness and was thus unable to call the victor. But looking at the imposing form of Stella treading alone upon the seared land as she made for the gate, all present understood and believed that the victor, the one who had dominated Block B, was the Crimson Princess. This was a matter of course, for she had faced every member of Block B aside from herself and had defeated them all. She had only won her first-round battle, but in truth this victor equated to her topping Block B.

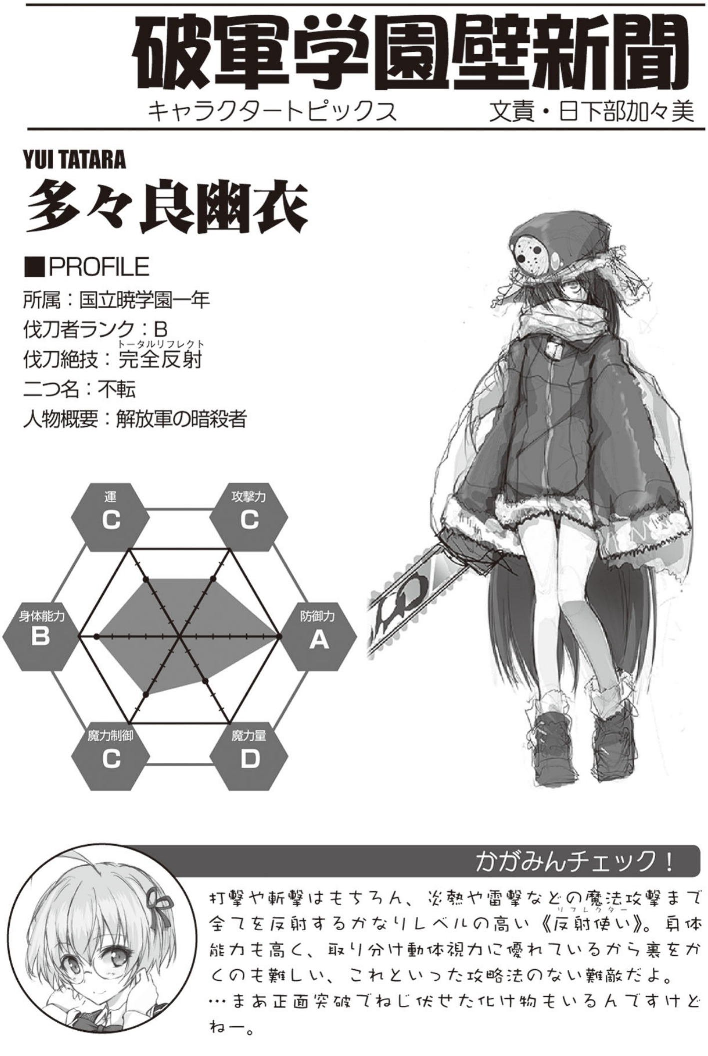
This belief would become truth shortly. Yui Tatara, whom Stella should have fought in the second match of the second round, was declared medically unfit to participate. Among the first match's participants, Rinna Kazamatsuri declared that she intended to resign, while word was handed down disqualifying Reisen Hiraga for not having appeared in person.

Thus, Crimson Princess Stella Vermillion became the first person to reach the semi-finals of the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival, getting there with but a single battle.

References

1. ↑ *Senben Junka*, 千弁楯花: "Thousand-Petal Blossom Shield"
2. ↑ *Mecha*, メカ: A large humanoid machine controlled by a pilot, common to the Japanese science fiction genre of the same name.
3. ↑ *Bahamut Howl*: This uses the kanji 暴竜の咆吼, *Bouryuu no Houkou* ("Rampant Dragon's Roar").

Chapter 6: The First Battle's End



破軍学園壁新聞

キャラクタートピックス　文責・日下部加々美

YUI TATARA

多々良幽衣

■PROFILE

所属：国立暁学園一年

伐刀者ランク：B

伐刀絶技：完全反射（トータルリフレクト）

二つ名：不転

人物概要：解放軍の暗殺者

かがみんチェック！

打撃や斬撃はもちろん、炎熱や雷撃などの魔法攻撃まで全てを反射するかなりレベルの高い《反射使い（リフレクター）》。身体能力も高く、取り分け動体視力に優れているから裏をかくのも難しい、これといった攻略法のない難敵だよ。…まあ正面突破でねじ伏せた化け物もいるんですけどねー。

Part 1

Once Stella had left, Arisuin heaved a huge sigh of relief as he leaned on the railings.

"Well, she had me worried about what was going to happen for a while there."

"Exactly. It was already enough that Onii-sama's match was such a nailbiter."

"Umm, sorry?"

Ikki flashed a wry grin at the jibe.

The safe victory of their close friend lent to an air of peace between the three. Kiriko Yakushi on the other hand, having no contact with Stella for her part, seemed quite shaken by the match's explosive denouement.

"That was an amazing technique, to be able to burn an area as large as the entire ring in a single instant. If one were to attempt to dodge by vaporizing oneself or something, the vaporized cells might be annihilated altogether. It was really fortunate that we could see it this early."

"Honestly, I share that sentiment. It seems it would be best to avoid using Aoiro Rinne as much as possible when fighting against Stella."

However, evading a technique possessing such an extreme area-of-effect that it could casually cover the space of the ring using martial arts alone was impossible. Shizuku sighed as she pondered such unreasonableness.

"No wonder she had walked in so confidently and called for a four-on-one match."

Shizuku turned to Ikki, as though expecting his approval.

"She really gained a ridiculous ability from her special training with the Yaksha Princess."

He however shook his head.

"…No, I don't think that's the case."

"Eh?"

What was wrong? It was that Shizuku had referred to Bahamut Soul as the ridiculous power that Stella had gained.

"Bahamut Soul wasn't something that she gained from her special training with Saikyou-sensei. She could already do something like that when she had just started school."

"I-Is that so!? But we never even saw it once!"

"Of course. Such an indiscriminate technique could never be used when there were bystanders around, could it?"

Kurono concurred with Ikki's statement.

"I agree with that. Most likely, as Muroto-senpai noted, Bahamut Soul is a Noble Art that resembles a loud shout in that it discards control right from the start. Thus, it isn't a technique that requires anything special, or any special training—it's something anyone can use. Even though you could call betting on the people around her to cover for her and just cut loose 'growth', it's a little lacking for a week's worth of special training."

"So her training didn't bear fruit?" Shizuku asked.

Ikki shook his head again.

"That's also wrong, I think. When she was entering the ring, she had a confidence, a spirit that wasn't present in the Stella who had been defeated in battle with Ouma. So she did gain something from that training with Saikyou-sensei that allowed her to get over the shock of defeat, but that is not Bahamut Soul."

Which meant that—

"Stella has only shown us a fraction of her strength."

Everyone shivered a little, starting with Shizuku. She remembered. The momentary illusion that had appeared during the battle. The form of the towering dragon behind Stella. Ikki's idea was no impossibility for someone whose pressure was enough to create such an image. To be stuck in the same Festival as such a person could only be considered a nightmare.

Shizuku and company's strained expressions were thus only normal,bBut the one who had first mooted the idea of that nightmare, Ikki, had a different expression. Hardly stiff at all, he instead allowed a small smile onto his face.

You really are beautiful.

Of course, she was an opponent against whom considering the path to victory alone could give one a headache. But more than that, Ikki was glad. Glad that she was able to safely bounce back, even stronger than before.

「I didn't know that being weak could be so painful....」

He did not want to see Stella distraught like that. It made his heart hurt. He wanted her to always hold herself high, shining like a star in the sky. This was the Stella that he wanted to pursue.

I want to be closer to her than anyone, and yet I want her to be further from me than anyone... I'm plenty selfish, huh.

Even as he thought thus, the administration committee announcer's voice came over the airwaves.

「Everyone, your attention please. We will now have a twenty minute intermission while we clear and repair the ring. Once that is complete, we will proceed with the Block D matches. D Block representatives, please gather in your waiting rooms.」

The first to react at that announcement was Kurono.

"I'll make a move here: They'll probably need my ability to repair the ring."

Taking another drag out of her cigarette, she leapt down into the ring. The next to move were Shizuku and Kiriko, both entrants in D Block.

"Shall we go then, little sister?"

"Mm. I'm tired of waiting anyway."

Both of them had traded their observer's calm for their respective 'battle modes'. Perhaps it was due to watching Stella's match, but both their eyes shone with a prodigious will to fight.

"Do your best both of you. We'll support you from here."

"Thanks, Alice. But, Onii-sama, you should go and rest. It might affect your performance tomorrow if you push yourself too hard."

"It's fine, Shizuku. I can't do anything about my magic, but I'm quite well rested up from the time I spent watching Stella's match—moreover, you're my important sister, and it's your match. I'll cheer you on together with Alice."

"Thank you...."

Shizuku's cheeks warmed at Ikki's straightforward gentleness. From behind her, Kiriko shot him an accusatory glare.

"My~ aren't you going to support me too? Am I such a stranger?"

"Well, we did only get to know each other yesterday... but of course we will be looking forward to your match as well. I've heard, after all, that the White-Robed Knight is just as first-rate a knight as she is a doctor."

These were his honest feelings. Up till now, she had been of the view that she was a doctor and not a knight, and as such had not taken part in the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival. However, it had been said of her that if she had done so she would have at least wound up in the quarterfinals, and she had proved that to Ikki during the party several days before. As such, he had deep interest in how a match like hers would play out.

There was also another reason for this.

"...I'm also worried about your opponent, Yakushi-san."

"My opponent? You mean Akatsuki Academy's Shinomiya?"

Ikki nodded.

Indeed. Kiriko Yakushi's opponent in the fourth match of Block D was someone Ikki could not ignore—Akatsuki's Amane Shinomiya.

"Hmmm. I don't think he has that kind of spirit as befits a member of Akatsuki... but why do you think so?"

"I... don't know."

"You don't know?"

"I don't understand the reason why, but he worries me."

"Is it love?"

"No!"

Ikki nearly did a spit-take as he denied that outrageous misunderstanding.

"It's not like that, how do I say this… he just has an indescribable ominousness about him."

"Ominousness, huh."

His emotional response could even be said to approach disgust, But Ikki himself did not know why Amane turned his stomach so. If it was because he was part of Akatsuki, which had attacked Hagun Academy, that would be simple to understand, but he had already disliked him even before Amane had revealed that affiliation. Simply put, it was "hate at first sight". Why? He did not understand… and that was what made it ominous.

"Well, since the Worst One, whose strength lies in perceiving the true nature of others, feels that way… perhaps Amane does have something that we do not understand. I'll bear that in mind."

"Alright. No matter what, just be careful—"

Just as Ikki was seeing Kiriko off—

"Ahahaha—! I finally found you, Ikki-kun!"

He heard a voice, high like that of a girl, and then someone hugging him from behind. The impact was so small that it might as well have had no weight, and yet it made Ikki suck in a breath. With pale blonde hair, a sweet young face and an affable expression, the one hugging Ikki was none other than their topic of conversation, Amane Shinomiya.

Part 2

The umpire, having been knocked out by Bahamut Soul, had been unable to call the victor of Stella's match, her victory being announced by the commentator and the electronic billboards on-site instead. And of course, with the official television broadcast from the administration committee declaring her the winner, that victory would also send shockwaves through all of Japan.

This information also reached the medical ward in faraway Tokyo where Touka was watching the match. At her bedside was Kanata, who gave a thin smile as though amazed as they received the news.

"Well, well, I guess I shouldn't have expected anything else… I guess when I said she'd backed herself into a corner, it was just my own guilt speaking."

"Only in the end did we realize that it was always one-sided, and that she hadn't shown us all she had. Amazing."

"Will she continue like this all the way on to victory?"

Touka shook her head.

"I don't think it will be that simple. After all, the Sword Emperor of Wind did manage to completely seal Bahamut Soul. She's definitely one of the favorites, but by no means is her victory a definite thing."

"So this Festival will be a 'survival of the fittest A-Rank'?"

"Those two are a definite lock for the win, but they are not yet so outstanding that their clash will be all they wrote for this tournament. Aside from them, there are still others like the White-Robed Knight, Lorelei, Panzer Grizzly and the Worst One—it would not be so strange if any of them were to emerge triumphant."

"It seems there's still much to look forward to then."

"Mm… though if I could, I would have loved to take part."

Touka said, smiling wistfully. She had already accepted her defeat at Ikki's hands, and yet such grudging words were what left her lips.

I really am a sore loser.

"You could always challenge him again once the Festival is over."

"…Haha, that might be nice."

Just as they were about to get into some small talk—

"Ugh…."

A groan could be heard from the bed next to Touka's, before the figure that had been sleeping atop it slowly arose—the somewhat pint-sized Utakata Misogi, Hagun Academy's Student Council Vice-

President, who like Touka had been in a comatose state.

"Uta-kun!?"

"…Tou…ka…."

"You're awake, thas' great!"

Touka unknowingly slipped into dialect in her excitement.

"You still hurtin' anywhere?"

Utakata nodded, though he had a somewhat blank expression, as though he was still finding his bearings.

"Errr… um, yeah, I'm fine…. This is… the infirmary? Why am I here?"

"Uta-kun… you don't remember?"

Utakata nodded to Touka's question.

"Even though it was just illusionary form, the shock from damage that could put a person into a coma for a week or more might have muddled his memories."

"Yes, that seems so."

That made things simple, though.

Illusionary form caused no physical damage to the body itself. As such, memory loss due to brain damage was impossible—the memories were surely still in Utakata's mind. As such, all they needed to do was explain the situation to him. Touka cleared her throat, and prodded his memory with a voice like one talking to a child.

"When our school was attacked. We fought and were defeated by the students from Akatsuki Academy. Don't you remember?"

"Akatsuki… Academy…."

He mumbled—then his eyes widened, his expression strained as he cried out with alarm.

"Kanata! Have I really been out for a week!?"

"Um, yes. That's correct."

"You seem to have remembered. That's good."

"Ah, well… that's true, but what about the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival…."

"It just started today. Kurogane-kun and Stella-san just broke through the first round without incident. Shizuku is replacing Kana-chan, and her match is about to begin."

Relating the events up till then to Utakata, Touka had expected that he might be pleased. But he did not respond as expected.

"What's…—kgh!"

His face distressed, he shot up from his bed, casting his blanket aside. But his legs though uninjured were still creaking from a week-long sleep. They disobeyed him, pitching him off the antibacterial linen bed and onto the floor.

"Agh!"

"U-Uta-kun!?"

"Please don't push yourself too hard. You've been out for a more than a week, you know? There's no way you would be able to use your legs well."

"But I have to tell them! …That's right, my notebook! Where's my student notebook!?"

His nose was bleeding, but he was rummaging through the pockets of his hospital gown without bothering to wipe it—quite the rare sight, this urgency from the usually flighty Utakata. But this also meant that this was no ordinary situation.

"Uta-kun, what's got you so worked up? What do you need to say, and who do you need to tell it to?"

"They must not… fight him…."

"Eh?"

"Akatsuki's… Amane Shinomiya…! They must not fight him! …If they do, then all will be lost…!"

Amane Shinomiya. Of course Touka and Kanata knew that name: he had been one of the Akatsuki representatives who had attacked Hagun.

Now that you mention it, Uta-kun had been the one to fight him....

All her faculties had been expended fighting Ouma, and as such Touka had not noticed the details of the other fights.

"Is that kid really that strong?"

Utakata shook his head.

"Strong, weak... that's got nothing to do with it. He's beyond that."

"What do you mean 'beyond that'?"

"At that time, we thought that he had the power of 'foresight'. But we were wrong. We were mistaken. His ability is not foresight! It's something worse, more brutal... it's absolute power! They mustn't fight him... or even associate with him.... There's no way they can win!"

Part 3

"Long time no see, Ikki-kun! Congratulations on your first-round victory!"

"A-Amane-kun...."

Ikki's expression was strained at Amane's sudden appearance. He was already not particularly good at dealing with him, and to add on to that, he had just been...bad-mouthing Amane, which left him feeling rather embarrassed.

But Amane seemed unaware of that, instead hanging off of Ikki like a puppy wagging its tail.

"I saw the match just now. You were so cool, so I just had to come down to find and congratulate you!"

"Umm... thanks?"

"I should be the one thanking you! After all, I was able to watch your match in person—watch you, whom I admire so! There could be no higher joy for a fan! And you really were awesome. You actually managed to do something like stealing Twin Wing's swordsmanship! You were pretty good during the match against the Hunter too, so I thought that your Blade Steal was an accessory to Perfect Vision… and I was completely wrong!"

Amane, his breathing ragged, began to gesticulate excitedly like a little child as he related his thoughts on Ikki's match earlier.

"And was that Shinkirou? I saw it once on some video site, but it was pretty poor quality and lagged quite a bit since it was taken using a hidden mobile camera. So it's a technique used to confuse the opponent! You're really amazing, to be able to do something like that even without possessing any special abilities—I'm so moved!"

Ikki almost seemed to shrink a little.

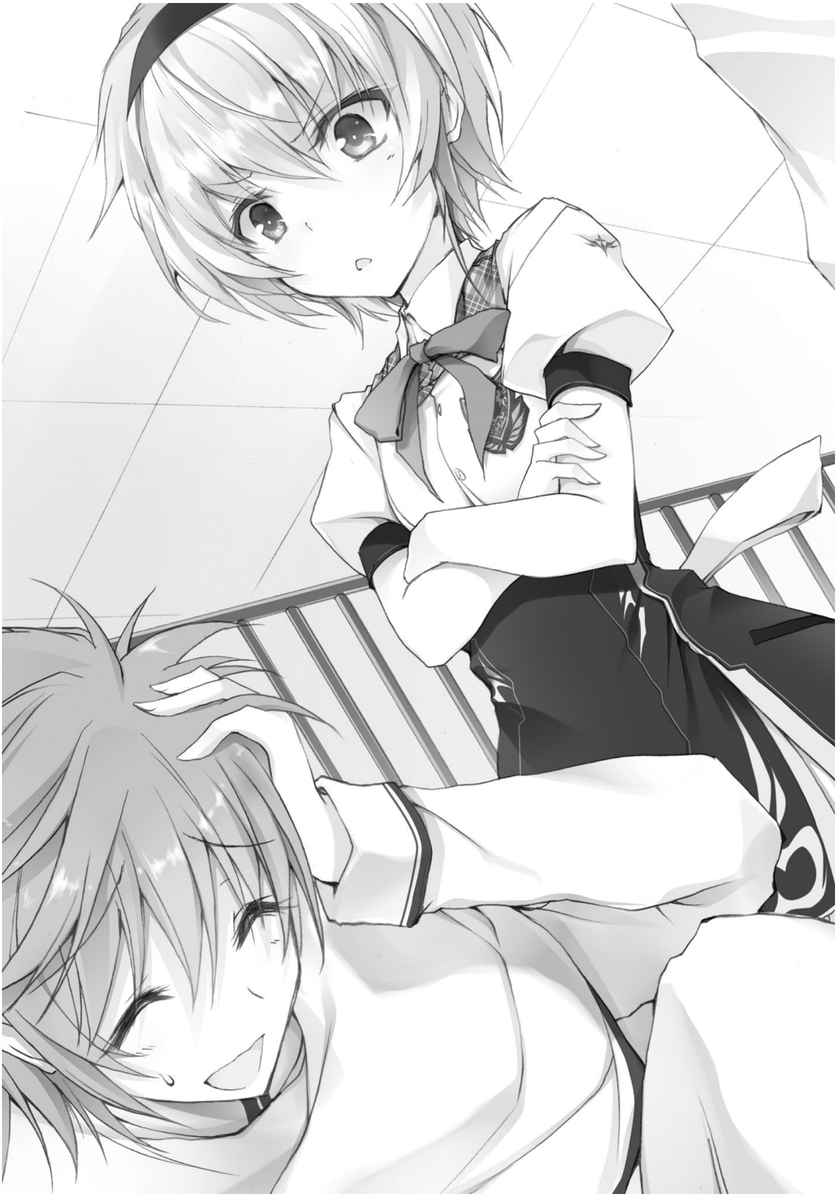
"I know, I know, so… please calm down."

As expected, he was terrible at dealing with Amane. The boy himself seemed to be approaching him in such goodwill, and yet he himself could muster up none. That twisting of emotions left him feeling terrible. He wanted to distance himself from Amane. Reject him. But Ikki said nothing. This was not weakness or cowardice. He did not wish to antagonize someone who seemed to admire him so over some inexplicable feeling of disgust. But—

"Excuse me."

"Ah—"

But Shizuku, who stood beside him, was not one to entertain such thoughts.



Without hesitation, she leveled a kick at Amane's side, peeling him off Ikki, before interposing herself between them as though to protect her brother.

"Ow, ow, ow… what are you doing…."

Amane groaned tearfully, his hands on his stomach. But Shizuku did not back down a step.

"Please don't come near my Onii-sama. He doesn't like you, and feels disgusted by you. So could you stop being so familiar? You're troubling him."

Of all things, she chose to reveal all of Ikki's inexplicable ill-will without a shred of hesitation.

"Eh… is, is that so, Ikki-kun?"

"Shi-Shizuku."

His face steely, he tried to stop Shizuku—

"Onii-sama, you detest the fact that you dislike someone for no reason. While I love that gentleness, there is no need to waste it on him and his ilk—save it for me instead. And claiming to be your fan after messing up our school like that… I don't see why you should give this weirdo the time of day. If you don't reject him clearly like this, he will just take advantage of you."

-but was in turn silenced by her all-too-accurate, all-too-direct assessment.

"Ugh."

And in the first place, that he had abetted in the attack on Hagun alone was reason enough to stand Amane in a bad stead from Shizuku's perspective. She harbored suspicions of her own that Ikki had already begun disliking Amane even before that incident, but at this point the order no longer mattered. The girlish boy in front of them was an enemy who had done them harm. Nothing more and nothing less. In that sense, Ikki was too stiff, and Shizuku had to reject Amane in her brother's place.

"Well, that's how it is, so please disappear from Onii-sama's sight. Just as well, they were calling for the Block D participants. Shouldn't you be getting ready?"

Shizuku's eyes shone with an ethereal jade light, her tone becoming threatening.

"…Or should I bring you there? You might be missing a limb or two if I do, though."

Amane gulped, standing up but not approaching Ikki.

"Ahh… I guess so. I did deceive Ikki-kun after all. Of course you would hate me. I'm really sorry."

He bowed his head.

"Rejected."

Shizuku rebuffed his apology.

"Um, I was apologizing to Ikki-kun…."

"I won't allow you to apologize to Onii-sama, nor will I allow you to talk to him."

"You're… too brutal! I mean, you were already pretty frosty earlier, but whatever did I do to earn that hate!? I don't ever remember provoking you…."

"You do not endear yourself to me by using that androgynous face to tempt Onii-sama, and that sissy voice of yours riles me."

"Do you have to say such dreadful things!?"

"In the first place, even if I didn't go into detail, Onii-sama disliking you is reason enough for me to dislike you as well."

"Whoa, you're not giving me an island to cling to!?"

"Are you saying I'm flat!?"

"Now you're just finding reasons to hate me!"

Realizing that trying to reach an understanding with Shizuku in her absolute emnity was a futile endeavour, Amane could only send a sidelong pleading look Ikki's way as he spoke again.

"Shizuku-chan doesn't want to forgive me, but I actually am sorry. So while I did really intend on congratulating you, I came to offer penance for that incident."

"Penance?"

"Yes. I would like to make up with you… I'm sure it will please you."

Something that would please me?

His interest piqued, Ikki sought answers. "What do you mean by—"

「Attention, all Block D contestants.」

The rebroadcast cut in, drowning his words out.

「Your matches will begin in ten minutes. Please head down to the waiting rooms as soon as possible.」

Below, the ring had been reconstructed in the meantime, and the Block D matches would soon begin. At this moment Kiriko, who had been silent since Amane had arrived, spoke up.

"Shinomiya-kun. I'm an outsider either way, and didn't understand what you were saying, but it seems like it's time. I'm sure the teachers would be pissed if we didn't go to stand-by in the waiting rooms. Don't you think it might be better to save this conversation for later?"

Amane cocked his head, he question mark floating over it almost visible. And then he opened his mouth.

"Um… who are you again?"

Kiriko's eyes widened. That was abnormal—he didn't know the name of the opponent he was about to face.

"Man, and I took pride in being a pretty public figure too… pleased to meet your acquaintance. I am Kiriko Yakushi, third year at Rentei. Doctor by trade."

"Ohh. Sorry. I'm not really familiar with any knights apart from Ikki-kun."

"You should have at least heard my name. I am, after all, the one you'll be facing in the fourth match of Block D."

"…Oh, really. Can't say I'm that interested."

Amane flashed an obfuscating smile. It seemed he truly did not recognize Kiriko, and that was certainly not pleasant news in her eyes, which narrowed.

"…Aren't you rather confident."

There was little warmth left in her voice.

"Being begged, I had no choice but to be here… but you've piqued my interest a little. I wonder if you can show me strength in keeping with that confidence."

A silent rage burned within her, clear for all to see. She would definitely go all-out against Amane right from the start of their match. There would be no mercy.

"Ah… that probably won't happen, I think?"

But her simmering anger failed to wipe the smile off Amane's face.

"What do you mean, I wonder?"

"Well, I, um, Kiriko-san, was it? I won't be fighting you, so there's no rush to get to the holding room."

His words bewildered all present. The tournament schedule and matches had already been decided, and they would soon face each other. How could he say something that he couldn't fight her now?

"What are you saying—"

Kiriko began to ask—but at that moment, the student handbook in her pocket began to ring. Angered as she was over Amane's disregarding her, she very much wanted to ignore that call, but for the siren-like ring tone that sounded from her handbook. That meant neither a message from friend or family, but a call from the Yakushi General Hospital of which she was director. She could not ignore it.

"Hang on a moment."

She fished for the phone.

"Hello. What's happening? I'm having my match soon—"

「Doctor!」

An anguished voice belonging to the Vice-Director—and its present head in Kiriko's absence—of the hospital, Mio Kajiwara, ripped through the ears of all present.

「W-We have a problem! A big problem!」

Behind her, there were sounds of a panicked tumult that should have been foreign to a hospital.

Kiriko caught on to that unnatural situation quickly.

"Wait. What's going on?"

「The patients' conditions have worsened greatly—they're in critical condition!」

"What...!?"

Kiriko gasped, her face one of disbelief. She had had to make sure that her patients were in a stable condition and would not take any sudden turns for the worse while she was gone—that had been her absolute condition for taking part in the Festival. That she was here meant that this condition should have been fulfilled. No doctor would simply leave patients whose conditions could deteriorate at any time to their own devices, after all. And indeed she had, as the number one doctor in Japan, judged that there had been no risk of her patients deteriorating for the period of the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival.

Unease bubbled up within her.

My diagnosis was... mistaken!?

But she quashed it swiftly. This was neither the time nor place to curse her own incompetence. She had to get a hold of the situation first.

"Who exactly is in critical condition?"

Mio's voice shook terribly.

「A-All the patients!」

The color drained from Kiriko's face.

"W... What!?"

「The staff are doing all they can, but we don't have the manpower or the facilities to deal with this! Moreover, we have no idea how this happened so suddenly, or what might have it caused it... our techniques aren't working at all either! So....」

Kiriko knew it then. This was impossible. It might be reasonable for her to have overlooked one or two people, but for her to have misdiagnosed all her patients—that could not be. So, how had it happened? There could only be one reason.

"I understand. Send a chopper, I'll be right over."

「I've already done that! It should arrive in ten minutes! I'm… really… *sob* …sorry…! It was supposed to be a big match for you….」

"Don't cry. I was the one who asked you all to call me back if anything happened. And the deterioration of their conditions wasn't your responsibility. In any case, hold the line till I get back. Can you do it?"

「Y, yes! I can!」

"That's a good answer. I'm counting on you."

Kiriko hung up, and then turning to Amane leveled a gaze filled with murderous fury on him, her tone unrelenting.

"So, may I ask what this is about, Shinomiya-kun?"

Since the mistake did not lie in her diagnoses, there could only be one reason for this situation: the interference of a third party.

"What have you done to my patients?"

"Hey, hey now, that's harsh. What could I, being in Osaka, possibly have done to people in a hospital in Hiroshima?"

This third person had created this situation in order to force her out of the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival. If her patients were to be in critical condition, she would not be able to concern herself with such things as a tournament match. She would have to forfeit. And that culprit was without a doubt the young man in front of her who had just spouted those deceptively meaningful lines. But here he was, Amane Shinomiya, waving his arms about in a flustered manner as he tried to sell his alibi. Indeed, there was very little a person in Osaka could do to people in Hiroshima. Even if they had help from the start, there was no way they could have bypassed the vigilance of medical professionals to induce critical conditions in all the patients in a hospital.

But this assumed that one was speaking of a normal person. To the side, Ikki recalled something that Kagami had told him shortly before they left for Osaka.

"Senpai. You called me before to say that you were concerned about the ex-Kyomon student, Amane Shinomiya, correct? So I looked up his intra-school selection results… he had six wins by forfeit in six matches.

There's something really weird about that."

In that instant, all the pieces came together for him.

"Huh. So that's it. That's what this is about… I understand now."

"Onii-sama?"

"In other words… that's your real ability."

Part 4

"Ikki-kun? My true ability… what do you mean? I thought you knew that my ability was foresight? I knew that Kiriko-san would have to retire, but besides that, I didn't—"

Ikki shook his head.

"No, that's not possible. It would be one thing if she misdiagnosed one or two patients, but for her to do that for all of them is simply impossible. And there is no way that you could foresee something that could not possibly happen."

"Well, this… ahaha, such cruel words, Ikki-kun."

Amane had a troubled expression.

"Don't they say even a wise man stumbles? And I've even performed quite a few predictions in front of you too…."

He did speak the truth. He had foretold the future against a criminal at their first meeting, and had seen through Arisuin's betrayal. It was now as it was then: Amane was displaying his knowledge of the future.

"No, you don't actually foretell the future. The order of things is reversed here."

At these words, the smile that Amane usually had plastered on his face dissipated, a shadow falling over it.

Arisuin cut in.

"Wait, Ikki. What do you mean by 'reversed'?"

"I should have realized this when he defeated Vice President Utakata. The Vice President's ability, Fifty-Fifty, manipulates probability such that he can twist a result that had already been decided. Since the manipulation is limited to what he can achieve with his own abilities, it lacks offensive power, but he should have been nigh invincible as long as he focused on defense. But he lost. He lost to Amane. Someone who lacks any martial ability at all, possessing only foresight. Do you think this is possible?"

"That's…."

"Impossible. Utterly impossible. If we assume it were possible, then the only way is to use a probability manipulation technique strong enough to force certainty onto Fifty-Fifty. For example… an ability that can change probability according to your wishes. Like this, all can be explained. In other words, Amane's foresight is not in fact a foretelling of the future. The truth behind the criminal, Alice's betrayal, and now the collapse of Yakushi-san's patients… these are all 'futures' that he simply created. Am I wrong, Amane?"

Having said his piece, Ikki leveled his gaze at Amane, who had not said a word since earlier, merely looking at Ikki in silence.

"…Haa."

He sighed, shoulders drooping, and then flashed a resigned smile.

"As expected of Ikki-kun, I guess. You covered everything that I could say. I was going to reveal it to you together with the my penance, but you're too good. My poor subterfuge was nothing before the magic mirror of the Crownless Sword King."

"So it's true that you're the one who did something to Yakushi-san's patients."

"Ah, w-wait! Wait! That's not it!"

Sensing Ikki's enmity, Amane quickly added to his analysis of his own ability.

"It is as you said, but I would like to make a correction. Yes, my ability is indeed not foresight, but I do not wield some god-like ability as Ikki says. You know… I only make wishes."

"Wishes?"

"Yes, just wishes. I cannot change every little thing about fate. I only wished to have 'a dramatic first meeting with Ikki-kun', for 'the assault on Hagun to go off without a hitch', or 'it would be troublesome to have to fight'. Just that. And when I do so, everything will change such that it will eventually go as I wish, but without my knowledge. For me, whose nickname is "Bad Luck"[1], this is my true power--*Nameless Glory*[2]."

Ikki and company's expressions became strained.

"What… that's… insane…."

"So, what, could you call the moon to crash down onto the earth if you wished for it?"

Amane cocked an eyebrow in displeasure at Shizuku.

"Scary—I would never wish for that to happen; wouldn't it be terrible if that were to come true? After all, there has never been a single wish of mine up till now that has not come to be."

No one could suppress a shiver at the matter-of-factness in his voice. At how confident he was that he was able to do such a thing. They could not help but be more wary of him, who could overturn the common sense of destiny in that manner.

A weight descended on the conversation… before Kiriko took a step towards Amane.

"In other words, your ability to have any wish come true can also be put as an impossible amount of luck, huh."

"That's absolutely correct. Just that it takes a roundabout route to fulfilling my wish, and that the method by which it fulfills it something unknown to me."

Amane pressed his palms together in apology.

"So really, I didn't mean to or predict that I would endanger the lives of your patients. Sorry about that."

And yet it felt like he was apologizing for someone else; there was no guilt in his tone. In fact, he did regard it as someone else's business. He had only wished to not have to fight Kiriko. He had not wished to take the lives of her patients. It wasn't his fault.

But such an attitude would of course anger Kiriko. In an instant, a trio of scalpels found their way into either hand.

"So what if I just killed you here and now, and return that evil fate to normal?"

Her tone was even, but the anger roiling forth from her eyes said that all she wanted to do was to attack Amane right there and then. But he merely shrugged, unfazed by the pressure she exuded.

"Of course my death would nullify the effects of my ability, but I wouldn't recommend it. After all, if that were to happen, I would wish to not die. From my experience, there are a lot of ways that this could make you not fight me. For example, if an earthquake were to strike this place that is all but filled to the brim with people, and there were a great many casualties, you wouldn't be able to spare the time to fight me, no?"

"Can you really do that?"

"Well, I'd rather not of course. But if it comes down to it, I'm not taking responsibility, so I'd rather you not push it...."

"...Tch."

With a click of her tongue, Kiriko ended their exchange and dismissed her scalpels. She could not tell whether or not Amane spoke the truth. But there was one thing for certain: if she stepped out right now with the intent to kill, then his words might just come true. That was a risk she could not take, as one who called herself a doctor. That was her bottomline.

Seeing that Kiriko had lost the will to fight, Amane continued speaking, turning from her to face Ikki.

"Well, now that everyone understand why I'm in no rush to go to my waiting room, I'll continue; I'd really like for Ikki-kun to accept my repayment for last time."

Ikki did not meet Amane's eyes, his brows furrowing as that feeling of distaste welled up within him again.

"As I said before, I wanted to tell Ikki-kun about my true ability as penance for having deceived him up till now... I was already seen through though, how embarrassing. Of course, I didn't think I would be able to pay back the debt of having cheated him for this long with just that."

He spoke with an amiable smile.

"So I thought about it. What would make Ikki-kun happy? What could I do to make him happy?"

Ikki felt the hairs of his skin stand on end at that. He had a bad feeling about this. That he must not let Amane finish speaking. But Amane was not to be stopped.

"And so, I remembered. That if Ikki-kun couldn't come in first at the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival, he wouldn't be able to graduate! Terrible, isn't it? To not acknowledge a knight as strong as Ikki-kun. As a fan of his, how could I take that? Totally unacceptable. So, that is my present to Ikki-kun...."

His smile turned as incandescent as his words were unbelievable.

"...First place at the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival."

"Wh-Whaa!?"

"What are you saying...!"

Shizuku and Arisuin both looked shaken, their voices trembling, but Amane merely cocked his head to the side.

"Is it really that shocking? Isn't it a lot simpler than causing an earthquake, or causing the moon to fall to the earth?"

His smile broadened as he pressed in on Ikki.

"Aren't you happy, Ikki-kun? I will use my ability to wish... for your victory! Like this, you'll be able to become the Seven Stars Sword King with hardly any effort at all! Isn't it great? Your hard work up till now will finally be rewarded! Do not fret: neither the Crimson Princess nor the Sword Emperor of Wind are a problem before my Nameless Glory! I will take out the rest of the competition, making sure that you will certainly become the Seven Stars Sword King! Well, that might incur the wrath of Rebellion, but that's fine. I would do anything for you, Ikki-ku—"

In that moment, with a thud that resounded through the participant-reserved stands—Ikki pushed Amane away with all his might.

Part 5

"O-Onii-sama!?"

"I-Ikki…-kun…"

Everyone, whether it was the people around him or the suddenly floored Amane himself, was dumbfounded at the usually gentle Ikki's sudden violence. But to Ikki himself, it was a most reasonable course of action. He had long been unable to reconcile his unreasonable distaste for Amane, but now, finally, he could understand why he felt that way.

"…All this time, I didn't say this, because no matter how I thought it over, I couldn't understand why."

But at last he could speak from his heart. He glared at Amane.

"I hate you."

Amane's eyes widened as he trembled. He probably could not understand why he was being rejected by Ikki. It was for Ikki's own sake, after all, that Amane had wanted him to become the Seven Star Sword King.

But for Ikki, this was the last straw, that last thing that allowed him to throw away what reservations he might have had about Amane. For Amane was trying to take something most important to Ikki away from him. The work he had put in up till now, and all that that meant. Including the promise he had made with his beloved, the promise that had seen him through many times. In that moment, his mottle of emotions gave way to a clear disgust, to the point where there was no longer a need for a reason to feel that way. Ikki spoke with undisguised fury in his eyes.

"You try to mess with my battle, and this will not be settled with just a push or a shove."

Amane stood in silence with his head bowed, his expression unreadable under his fringe. Perhaps he was crying. He turned on his heel, facing his back to Ikki and the others.

"I understand."

Then, turning around—he smiled more brilliantly than ever before.

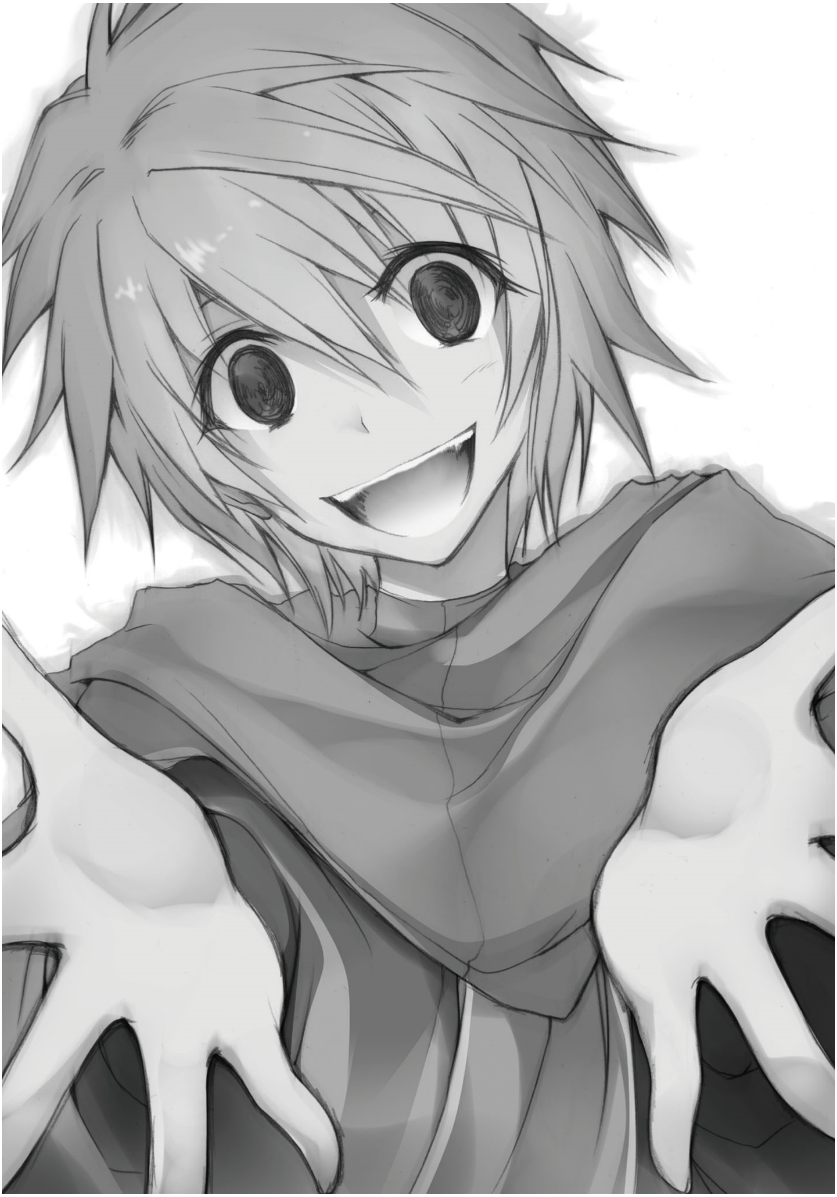
That was unexpected. Ikki's face showed as much. Even after being rejected in that manner, his attitude had not changed in the least.

"I will not wish for anything Ikki-kun wouldn't wish for. I promise!"

An ominous feeling seized Ikki, like a worm crawling about his heart. Amane seemed as friendly he had always been in both appearance and tone, and yet—

"As expected, Ikki-kun is cool… you will never accept a victory that you didn't earn with your own two hands. My, I'm becoming more of a fan!"

—his eyes were different. Or rather, Ikki only noticed now that Amane's eyes were different. He had subconsciously refused to meet those eyes up till now, preoccupied as he was with that unknown feeling of disgust he had borne toward him. But now that he had made his stand clear, he could look him in the eye… and so he noticed.



While Amane showered glittering praises upon Ikki, the depths of his sky-blue eyes held a quagmire of spiralling darkness, threatening to suck a person in.

"When up against opponents of overwhelming power, you give your all, sacrifice everything, and fight to the bitter end. It's so cool… I envy you. How stoic, how spartan a living! Weaker than everyone, yet desiring victory more than anyone—and for victory's sake, you burn your soul as you advance, without any regrets, no matter how torn up you become as a result! That's the Worst One! And you know what, Ikki-kun? You know what? I. Love. You. For. It."

A negative chaos. A dark swirl of hate, revulsion, enmity, malice, murderousness.... A whirlpool deluged by myriad negativities, so much so that one could no longer tell which was his original thought. His lips steepled into a smile even as his eyes bored into Ikki, filled as they were with despair, malice, and a hatred against the world itself, drawing the selfsame ill-omened arc as the red crescent moon.

"And so… and so… hurt more. Bleed more. Cut more. I will cheer for that Ikki-kun until I grow hoarse. I want to see you break, break, and break as you keep on defying your fate!"

For the first time, Ikki was afraid of Amane. This was no longer disgust. No longer rejection. He was afraid of the young man in front of him. Of the hatred he held for the world, hidden deep within his eyes. And above all, the way that gaze was affixed upon himself.

"So… keep working hard, okay?"

And with that last show of support that no one echoed, Amane left, that unfailingly friendly smile still on his face. But having experienced the unfathomable darkness that lay behind that smile, Ikki's hands trembled, as though they were frozen.

Part 6

The sudden failure of the White-Robed Knight to show up notwithstanding, the Block D matches of the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival proceeded more smoothly than Block C, in which the Seven Star Sword King had been defeated by an F-Ranked Knight, and Block B, in which an unprecedented four-versus-one match had taken place. Shizuku Kurogane appeared in the 3rd match of Block D. There, she showed off her prowess as the block's only B-Ranked Knight with little incident, blowing her opponent out of the water and advancing to the second round without so much as a scratch. With this, all of Hagun Academy's representatives successfully proceeded to the second round: a ten-out-of-ten start that certainly boded well.

This, however, had not lifted Ikki's spirits.

"Blub-blub…."

It was night, and Ikki was submerged up to the mouth in the bathtub of his hotel room, his face scrunched up in gloomy thought. And that which he was pondering with that clouded expression was the matter of Amane 'Bad Luck' Shinomiya.

He had afterward been contacted by Kanata, who informed him that Touka and Utakata had awoken, and also informed him about Amane's ability. It seemed that Amane's own detailing of his abilities had not been false. The ability to make all things under heaven bend for his good was truly not one that was easy to go up against.

But Ikki was not merely concerned about the ability itself. What he was worried about… are those eyes. That chaos of negativity that he had seen in Amane's eyes as he left. That toxic hatred of everything in the world. When he had looked into those eyes, he had felt that—he's seen those eyes before somewhere, sometime in the past….

Closing his eyes, he searched his memories, plumbing its depths as one would a bottomless, dark well. Deeper and deeper, further and further he searched—and he met those eyes at the very bottom. Even in the pitch darkness, a black silhouette staring at him could be made out, its eyes filled with a hatred for the world.

His insides churned with revulsion, but more so with fear. Indeed… he had met this person, this young man—somewhere in the distant past. And he knew then, that the reason for his inexplicable distaste for Amane—indeed, of all his questions about him—had to lie in that first meeting. Their first meeting had been both 'root' and 'key'.

So he had to know. When had they first met? What happened then? What happened to make him hate Amane so?

He continued to search. But he found no more. Remembered no more. Only those eyes, gazing at him in the darkness.

"Despite having beaten the Seven Stars Sword King, you look rather unhappy for the man of the hour."

In contrast to Ikki's scrunched up face, Arisuin leaned back in his corner of the furo, submerged below the thighs.

"I mean, he is quite the ominous fellow, but it's best not to think about it too much. Thinking about someone who defies logical explanation is just going to make your head hurt. Or..."

Here his smile turned impish.

"...do you need someone to help you take your mind off things?"

"I'll pass."

"Haha. I was kidding. I don't want to get killed by Stella-chan or Shizuku."

Ikki would rather Arisuin not joke about it at all, as a wave of cold ran through him despite being immersed in the hot bath—but thanks to that, he was no longer in the mood to brood. Noting Ikki's curious state, Arisuin continued.

"In any case, there's no need for you to be concerned about this and that. If you two continue to progress, you would only meet in round four—the semifinals. And Amane is in Block D. For him to reach the semis, he will have to meet Shizuku in the Block finals."

"Are you saying that since Shizuku will win, I won't have to fight Amane-kun?"

"Exactly. Heh, Bad Luck may have a powerful ability, but it might have been a mistake to get cocky and go on telling us all about it. Shizuku seems to think that she has a way to defeat Nameless Glory."

"Eh, really? Then what—"

"It's a pity, but she hasn't told me either. Well, if she told me and then I told you, it would be unfair as fellow participants in the same tournament, no? But I don't think that Shizuku would have said this without basis. She must have something close to a concrete plan."

"Indeed."

As Arisuin had said, Shizuku was not the sort to either speak to seem strong to or deceive others. As her brother, he knew this quite well. So, she must have had something figured out.

"It might be thus more advisable to run simulations of fighting Shizuku instead of Amane, don't you think?"

"…That may be so."

It was natural for Ikki to root for his sister over Amane. And so he nodded, wishing to meet her in battle.

At that moment—a voice they did not recognize rang out.

"You're worrying about the semi-finals already, Crownless Sword King?"

There in the doorway stood a intelligent-looking young man with gracefully narrowed eyes.

"You're quite hasty, considering that the first matches have just ended," he mumbled.

Ikki knew this young man.

"B-Byakuya-san!"

"Well met. I don't think we have, since the party."

Indeed, this was Byakuya Jougasaki, a third year from Bukyoku Academy who had come to the party together with Moroboshi. He was the one who came in second the previous year… and was Ikki's second round opponent.

"Congratulations on your victory today. To think that Yuu would be defeated in his first match… that wasn't the outcome that I expected at all. How surprising."

"Th-Thanks. You didn't have a hard time in your match, did you? As expected of Byakuya-san."

"I was blessed with a weaker opponent, that's all. In any case, that's Hagun Academy's Black Sonia, Arisuin Nagi, yes?"

"Ara, you know about me?"

"I did some research into you since you were initially entered as one of Hagun's representative. 'Know thyself and thine enemy, and ye need not fear a hundred battles'—that's my motto… even though it proved to be unnecessary in the end."

"I'm sorry. I had my circumstances."

"So I've heard, more or less, but ultimately that's your own problem.

I'll avoid butting in with my piece. More importantly…."

So saying, he looked straight at Ikki, a slightly dangerous look in his narrow eyes. Why? The reason was a simple one.

"You seem to be pretty relaxed, Kurogane-kun. Disregarding your match with me tomorrow and just going straight to simulating your semi-final match."

"Erk…!"

Embarrassed, Ikki leapt out of the bath, wrapping the towel about his waist, and tried to explain himself.

"Ah, well, n-no! I would never underestimate Byakuya-san! It's just that… there's this really troublesome fellow—or rather should I say that he and I can't get along?—and so I just can't help but be more conscious of him than I should be."

Indeed, Ikki had never intended to look down on Byakuya. In fact, he was more than a little embarrassed that Byakuya had heard everything. For his part Byakuya smiled a little at the obviously flustered Ikki.

"Haha. I was kidding. I know that you're not the sort of person who would look down on his opponent. I was just trying to get your goat. Sorry about that."

"W-Well, as long as you understand, that's great."

It seemed that Byakuya wasn't actually angry, but was just pulling Ikki's leg a bit. That relieved him some.

"Still, I thought so when I first saw you at the party, but you really do have an amazing physique when viewed up close. I now understand those superhuman movements you made during the match today. That is no shallow effort you made to train your body to that extent. You have my respect."

"You don't have to be… I don't have anything other than my sword, and there's nothing I can do with it apart from honing myself."

"Don't be so humble. That's not something just anyone could do."

"Eh…?"

In that instant, a sound both agonized cry and shocked shriek escaped from Ikki's lips. For Byakuya's fingers were upon his chest.

"Now that I've touched it with my own hands, I understand. Each strand of muscle fibre has definition to the core, but not a one has lost its suppleness. The muscles themselves are light but strong—very impressive. Not an ounce of fat, nor an ounce of excess, for-show-only muscle. This is, indeed, the body of a trueborn swordsman, created only to wield his blade. An elegant design, created to display that purity of will. It is truly beautiful—one does not tire of touching it."

Every hair on Ikki's body stood on end as Byakuya's fingers toured the lines of his musculature, his shapely eyes gazing at him under long lashes. Wasn't this a dangerous situation? Gripped by an unspeakable fear, he leapt out of the bath, all but yelling for his friend.

"Alice, isn't it time for—"

"—me to get in on the action?"

"I'm being pincered!?"

But alas, there were only the three of them there. A tiger before, and a wolf behind. A horrid predicament. Ikki broke into a profuse cold sweat.

At that moment—

"You pervert-!!!"

—with a resounding warcry, a figure burst from the entrance to the bath, and pried Byakuya off Ikki with a kick, sending him flying into a corner of the bath. The young man who had done this was also from Bukyoku, and was Byakuya's friend—Yuudai Moroboshi.

"Moroboshi-san!"

"Yo, Kurogane. Somehow it feels like it was just like this yesterday too."

Yuudai greeted unabashedly, even before the one who had just defeated him just a while ago that day. On the other hand, Byakuya frowned at the one who had sent him flying.

"What are you doing all of a sudden, Yuu? Horseplay in the baths is dangerous."

"The dangerous one was you and yo' touchy-feely stuff sissyin' up the whole place!"

"How rude. Momiji is the one I love. I was only touching Kurogane-kun as a fellow one who lives for battle. It was a sign of respect."

"I know that, but think of how people would see it! Kurogane's crawlin' in his own skin, yo!"

"Oh. Then I apologize. I hadn't intended to scare you. I just wanted to get to know you better."

"...Eh."

"Dat's why I said choose yer words carefully!"

Smacking his friend on the back of the head, Moroboshi proceeded to cover for him.

"Sorry 'bout that, Kurogane. He does some scary stuff, but his sexual tastes are where you'd expect—don't worry 'bout it. It's just the way he does and acts."

"Aha, ahaha... it's a misunderstanding, so it's fine. Really."

He meant it enough, but though the misunderstanding had been cleared, Ikki still felt uncomfortable around—of course—Yuudai. Though it had been an honorable duel, Ikki had ultimately knocked him out to break through the first round. He wasn't sorry about it, but it was still hard to meet his eyes. While Yuudai did not show it, he was surely still a little sore.

Arisuin seemed to read his thoughts.

"In that case, should we go, Ikki?"

He was not joking this time.

"Yeah. Should we go get something to drink at the vendor?"

Ikki leapt onto that lifeboat, and they made to depart. Just then, Byakuya spoke up.

"Oh, you're both getting out already?"

Ikki nodded.

"I think we've spent enough time in the water. Any more and we might get faint."

"That's a shame. And I got into this misunderstanding with you to boot. I originally wanted to apologize by washing your back."

"U-um, no, it's alright."

"In that case—"

Byakuya snapped his fingers—and something surprising happened. Out of thin air, a bottle of green tea landed in Ikki's right hand, while Arisuin grasped a can of black coffee in his.

"Arara?"

"This is…!"

"At least accept this much."

As though to say "well then", Byakuya then turned his back to them before heading to the showers together with Yuudai. As they did so—

"Shiro[3], I'm from a merchant house too, y'know? Y'better have paid for those drinks."

"How rude. Of course I placed coins into the vending machine."

—could be heard. Leaving the bath, the two of them shut the door, keeping the hot steam from leaking out.

Arisuin pointed at the can that had suddenly appeared in his hands in surprise.

"Ikki… is this in fact his ability?"

Ikki nodded.

"This is the Noble Art of last year's second place, Eye of Heaven Byakuya Jougasaki—*God Hand*[4]."

It was an ability that allowed him to manipulate the placement of any object within a fifty-meter radius of himself via teleportation. Nondescript in theory, but very formidable in practice—especially so in a tournament that utilized a 10-countdown loss by ring-out rule. In fact, he had used this ability to bring his opponent out of the ring and thereby winning.

"...So once again it's a rather tricky ability."

"It is a powerful ability, but it's not easy to use. If the target object is immobile, then he can freely change their position like he did earlier. But for moving targets like humans, he has to wound them with his Device first before initiating the teleportation. It's probably a matter of locking onto a target via contact."

"So you mean that if you don't get touched, it'll be fine. I guess then the result of the battle will be quite up the air."

"Yes. Which is why... when I fight him, I will have to be wary of his other ability, the one that gave him his nickname."

"And that is?"

"What's in your hand, Arisuin?"

Ikki asked, indicating the green tea bottle in his hand.

"It's coffee. How lucky; I was just thinking to buy one after the bath."

"I, too, wanted to buy green tea after getting out of the bath. If you gave two people the same drink, it is possible for you to have matched one of their preferences, but to give two people different drinks and guess their preferences is a different thing, wouldn't you think?"

"Well, it would be a little difficult... so in other words, this is—?"

"Yes. Byakuya-san is a fighter famous for gathering an excessive amount of data on his opponents. Furthermore, he isn't limited to information gathered during combat, but his data-gathering also extends to the subtleties of everyday life."

"Now that you mention it, he did say that he was checking us out. But what does this mean?"

"It may not be information that means anything to us, but it's a very different matter to him. Of course he does take note of movements in combat or the movement of eyes, but he combines that with these small things to figure out a human's personality and inclinations. He is well known for being to expose the 'roots' of another person's thought—their 'logic'."

Exposing their logic. Arisuin asked in response to that praise.

"So, could he replicate the effects of your Perfect Vision?"

"Yes. Our approaches are different, but they are of a similar type… though Byakuya-san's method wins by far in terms of functionality. After all, my Perfect Vision is fairly reliant on collecting information in the midst of battles. But he would already have grasped his opponent's 'logic' before the battle thank to his meticulous investigation, and he would take control of a fight the moment it begins. Those monstrous powers of observation, that sees through all like the eyes of a god, are what gives him the moniker Eye of Heaven."

Manipulating his opponent with that godlike power of analysis, and then getting the one slash that would trigger his teleportation—that was Byakuya's style. His touching of Ikki previously had probably been for the sake of estimating his physical capabilities. He had already begun gathering data for the battle tomorrow. Indeed, this isn't the time or place to be worrying about the semi-finals. Having seen Byakuya's ability up close, Ikki felt this keenly. He was participating in the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival. A tough contest with the creme-de-la-creme of Japan's student mage-knights. Not one of them would be an easy customer to handle.

First, the second match. He needed to give beating Byakuya his all. He could leave thinking about the matter of Amane for later—so Ikki swore to himself.

Part 7

Ikki and Arisuin parted soon after leaving the bath in the basement, with the latter heading for the normal hotel rooms, and the former heading for his room on the tenth floor via the stairs. There were two reasons for this: one being that Arisuin's room was on the second floor, and the other being the need to rehabilitate his thigh, which had been pierced during the match in the afternoon. He had released his fatigue in the bath, and thanks to Arisuin and Byakuya his worries too were put aside; as such, his footsteps were light. He could probably sleep well tonight. All that was left now was to get to his room and rest.

But—his room was on the tenth floor, and yet he stopped at the seventh. This was where Stella's room was.

They did speak a little after the match, but… that was all they had spoken since then. Stella had headed to a Capsule for healing, while Ikki had been hounded by the press on account of his victory over the Seven Stars Sword King. …To be honest, that much conversation isn't enough. He wanted to talk to her more. Touch her more. Or perhaps that desire was stronger because he had put those worries down.

But this was only the first day of the competition. He should also be preparing for his match tomorrow. Would she think he wasn't serious if he went to see her today? Would she disdain him? Unease welled up within him.

No, no, don't think about that. Recalling the argument they had had at that pool, he shook his head. Then, they had attempted to place an unnatural distance between them, fearing that the other would think less of them. Since then, he had made up his mind. He would not hide his feelings for Stella. It was only natural that he would want to talk to his lover whom he hadn't seen for a while. There was no need to hesitate.

"Alright."

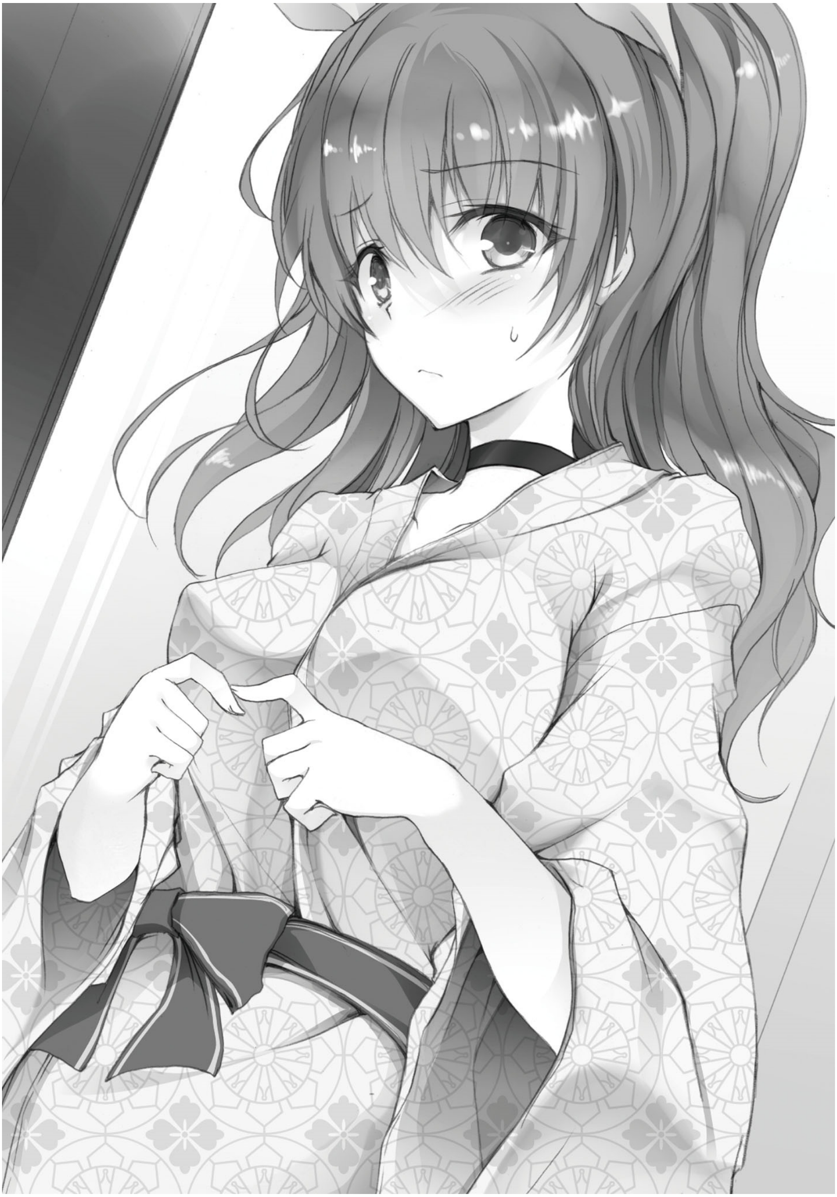
With that resolve, he headed for Stella's room. Stopping in front of her room, he rang the doorbell.

And then a second time.

No response.

"She's out, huh…?"

Ikki's shoulders slumped. She might even have, like him, gone off to the bath during this time. And he couldn't really be standing here waiting for her…. A man standing in front of his girlfriend's door. Wouldn't that be embarrassing, if he were seen by others who knew of their relationship. Thinking that he might have to give up here for today, Ikki turned on his heel and made for his room, but there—



"Wh… what should I do? The tournament is still ongoing, but I somehow came here…. I wonder if he would think of me as a shameless woman…. But we haven't spoken today at all…. Ooh…."

Stella mumbled to herself as she stood in front of Ikki's room, as though torn between ringing or not ringing his doorbell.

Uh, wow, wonder where he'd seen this before….

Ikki quirked his lips. His lover had thought the same way he had, coming to his room in hopes of meeting him. A strange happiness took hold of him suddenly as he thought her adorable, and this same emotion stopped him from calling out to her.

Her back was turned. She had yet to notice his presence. Ikki's smile turned devious at that thought. He would surprise her. Sneak up behind her and rap her on the shoulder. Give her a fright.

It was a childish prank. Ikki for his part knew that it was so, but the spirit was upon him. If he were to call out to her now, it would merely be a happy reunion. But if he were to surprise her, he would be able to see her shocked expression, even an angry one too. Her angry face was cute—so this was the more beneficial course of action. How clever of him.

Thus he silenced his footsteps, approached her.

"Wh—"

He made to tap her on the shoulder, intending to make a frightening sound—

"Don't slink up behind me-!"

"Woaaaah!!"

—which turned into a cry of shock. Before he could touch her, she swivelled around, leg extended in a roundhouse kick. Even without looking, the high kick was aimed right at his head. From the way it split the air, it was not born of any ordinary amount of strength. Only by his preternatural reflexes was Ikki able to bend backwards and avoid the blow.

"Damn, that habit from training reared its head… are you alright? …Eh, Ikki!?"

Stella's eyes widened as she realized that he had been the one behind her.

"Ha, hahaha… good evening, Stella."

His expression was stiff as he greeted her. One didn't expect to nearly lose his life over a little prank. Indeed, no evil deed ever went unpunished.

Part 8

Later, in Ikki's room, he and Stella were sitting side-by-side on the bed. As he related his real intentions to her, she had flashed a happy smile.

"So you were just trying to scare me.... Haha. You're surprisingly childish, Ikki."

Her unexpected counterattack had Ikki regretful and in a cold sweat, but so smitten with her was he that her motherly smile left him feeling, in fact, rather victorious.

"I put quite a bit behind that kick. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine… it didn't hit me, after all."

"I'm glad it was just you behind me, though. If it were anyone else, they might have died."

"Haha…"

Recalling the sharp crack of the wind as it scythed across the top of his head, his smile was rather forced.

"But those were some amazing reflexes there. I had totally silenced my footsteps and snuffed out my aura too."

It was practically a reflex reaction, and moreover it was precise, going for a vital spot despite not seeing the other party. That was something Stella had lacked before.

"Was that something you got from training with Saikyou-sensei?"

Stella nodded.

"Well, I've gotten pretty touchy about it since she would always appear in my blind spots as and when—ah."

"What is it?"

"Someone downstairs dropped a ten-yen coin."

What's this… that's amazing, but… I can't think of it as such. Odd.

"But speaking of amazing, you were amazing too, Ikki. I didn't think you would lose, but I didn't expect you to win in that preposterous way. That technique was really the one from that incident with Alice, wasn't it? It's just like you to make a loss more than just a loss."

She smiled, as though she were talking about herself. Ikki replied a little awkwardly.

"But I can't say that I'm using it right."

"Really?"

Ikki nodded.

"No matter what I do, I make too much noise. The real Twin Wings's sword is completely silent; there's no loss in power, and so there's no sound produced. I can't reproduce it with my technique as I am now."

Indeed, there was a huge gulf between Edelweiss' original swordsmanship and the one that Ikki had displayed against Moroboshi. Furthermore, the reason for this wasn't that Ikki had failed to steal her technique. He had stolen all of it. Understood the reasoning behind it. But despite this, he could not reproduce it. He lacked the ability to control the flow of power through his body as he executed her instant acceleration.

"I had confidence in my ability to master my body, but it seems I was naive."

His hands, placed in his lap, balled into tight fists.

"The more I imitate her, the more I come to understand that I'm still lacking."

Being unable to execute what he had stolen—that hadn't happened to him in a long while. Stella gave him a sideward look, her eyes mirthful as she laughed.

"Haha. That's also just like you."

"What do you mean?"

"That you hate to lose. I mean, she's the world's top swordsman, you know?"

The Twin Wings was not merely admired: for many Blazers, she was an object of fear and worship; she could be considered close to a goddess. No one believed that they belonged in the same world, the same plane of strength as her. They did not believe it, and thus from the beginning forfeited victory.

"But you actually seem displeased that you couldn't match her, Ikki."

He saw her as a rival. He, a mere Japanese student, who simply hated losing to the extreme. One could call him delusional, one who did not know his place.

"But… I like you when you're like that."

So saying, she gave him a dimpled smile. That she had them at all was something that Ikki discovered only after they had become lovers, for in truth she hated showing them to people, and would never show them to others regardless of how happy she might be. But she could show him such a smile—that cute expression was something that he alone could see. Knowing this, that smile set Ikki's heart thundering warm in his chest.

"Stella…."

It had been so long since he had last seen this smile up close. He caressed her cheek tenderly. She did not reject it, as one rejects not the wind in one's hair. He could feel her slightly high temperature through the palm of his hand. They were connected. Not by blood, but she had accepted him as though he were. These feelings got his blood up. Her flaming red hair. Glimmering crimson eyes. The heat of her skin. Her soft lips glistening in the light—everything about the girl before him was beautiful.

"Nnn…"

Without realizing it, he had pressed his lips over hers. It was not an ardent kiss, just a gentle one, just one to be sure that they were truly both there. But it was enough for him. The one he loved was so close by, and the thought that she too loved him made him so happy he could cry. At first, he took the lead… and as their lips touched gently, Stella took over. Lips parted, met, and parted…then met again, as though burying the time they had lost in one another.

Several wonderful minutes passed. When at last they parted, Stella, her cheeks flushed red, looked up at him.

"Ikki. Were you lonely while I was gone?"

Her voice was barely above a whisper, like a child confessing a sin to a parent. It seems she was worried that he had been lonesome because she had gone off on her own accord. By all rights, he should have comforted her. He should have said "no".

"Yeah. I was lonely."

But he said otherwise all the same. There was no reason to hide it.

"You know, before I came back to my room, I took a trip to yours."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah. I wanted to spend more time with you. I mean, the tournament is still on, and I thought you might think that I was taking it too lightly, but I still decided to press the doorbell anyway. No one was in, but I suppose that was because you were here...."

It seemed unmanly that he should feel lonely because he failed to meet with his girlfriend, but forget that. After all, he had felt that way because he had thought of her so intensely—and those were his true feelings.

"That's why I feel really blessed right now."

So saying, he wrapped an arm around her and held her a little tighter.

"I see."

Stella leaned in, a small smile on her face. That they had been unable to spend time together recently made these little moments of contact all the more wonderful. When he thought of it like that, even the moments they spend apart were lovely. He believed this from the bottom of his heart.

"Then, you should punish me, no?"

"...Huh?"

His brain ground to a halt. That didn't make sense. Ikki released the embrace.

"Um, what was that? I'm sorry if I heard you wrong, but did you say 'punish'?"

Stella's face remained red as she nodded. That only confused him more.

"Um… so you mean you want me to punish you?"

"Is there any other meaning?"

"That's true, but why do I have to do that?"

"Because, well, Ikki, you're supposed to be the man who will become my husband, right?"

Stella was gesticulating excitedly.

"Leaving you alone at her own convenience, is that something a wife should do? So, you have to punish me, right?"

From her serious expression, it didn't seem like she was joking.

"No… no, it's fine… it's doesn't have to be like that…."

He could not agree to this. He had been sad, yes, but the one he loved had already satisfied that. There was no need to do something so outrageous to her.

"That one week was time you had to have! I understand that… and I really don't want to play the part of some narrow-minded abuser who can't even understand that!?"

"Even if you're fine with it… I'm not!"

"…Ehhh…!?"

Then he remembered. This was just like that way back when she had come barging into his bath in her swimwear to uphold the agreement that the one who lost their mock battle would be the victor's servant. Proud and honorable as she was, she was very hard on herself. She would certainly keep all promises, and pay back all debts of wrongdoing. And she would not be dissuaded in doing so—troublesome.

In this case, letting her take the lead is a no-go.

Ikki decided this from that prior experience. Stella was usually quite shy, but when she was given free rein she could be quite bold. Who knew what absurd request she might make.

Things would get really out of hand if she said something like 'spank me'....

Hence, he struck first.

"I understand. So starting from now, I'm going to punish you. Do not resist."

He grasped her by the shoulders, bringing her face close to his, intending to kiss her on the cheek and count that for punishment before she could establish any concrete idea for what it should be.

"O-Okay. But no kissing. That's too gentle to be punishment."

She hit the nail on the head right before he could execute. It seemed she, too, knew him well. He winced. His escape route had been seen through and cut off in but an instant.

"I-I understand."

He had no idea what would happen if he backed out now. Changing plans, he brought Stella's face closer to his. Would he kiss her? No. He wouldn't. Wrapping his arms around her back, he held her close, and drew his face next to hers.

"This is punishment."

He breathed into her ear.

"So it's going to hurt a bit."

"Eh…?"

He placed his teeth to her ear. The ear lobe was quite sensitive to the touch, and the sensation of hot lips upon its uniquely cool surface was quite pleasurable. He put some strength behind his teeth, neither weak enough to be called nibbling nor strong enough to be biting. Just enough to leave a mark, enough to fulfill her request for judgement.

Then—

"Hii! A…ah…aaahh—!!!"

"Uwa!"

There was a high-pitched shriek, and Stella bucked hard in his arms, as though she were being electrocuted.

"Does it really hurt that much?"

Ikki asked, surprised by her intense reaction. She shook her head, clinging to him.

So it's not that it hurts, huh.

Ikki thought, looking at Stella as she trembled, crimson up to her ears.

Then, I wonder—

He then pressed his teeth up against her neck.

"Hnnnnnng!!!"

She moaned, gripping him tighter.

Could it be that she's the sort for whom a little pain gives way to pleasure instead?

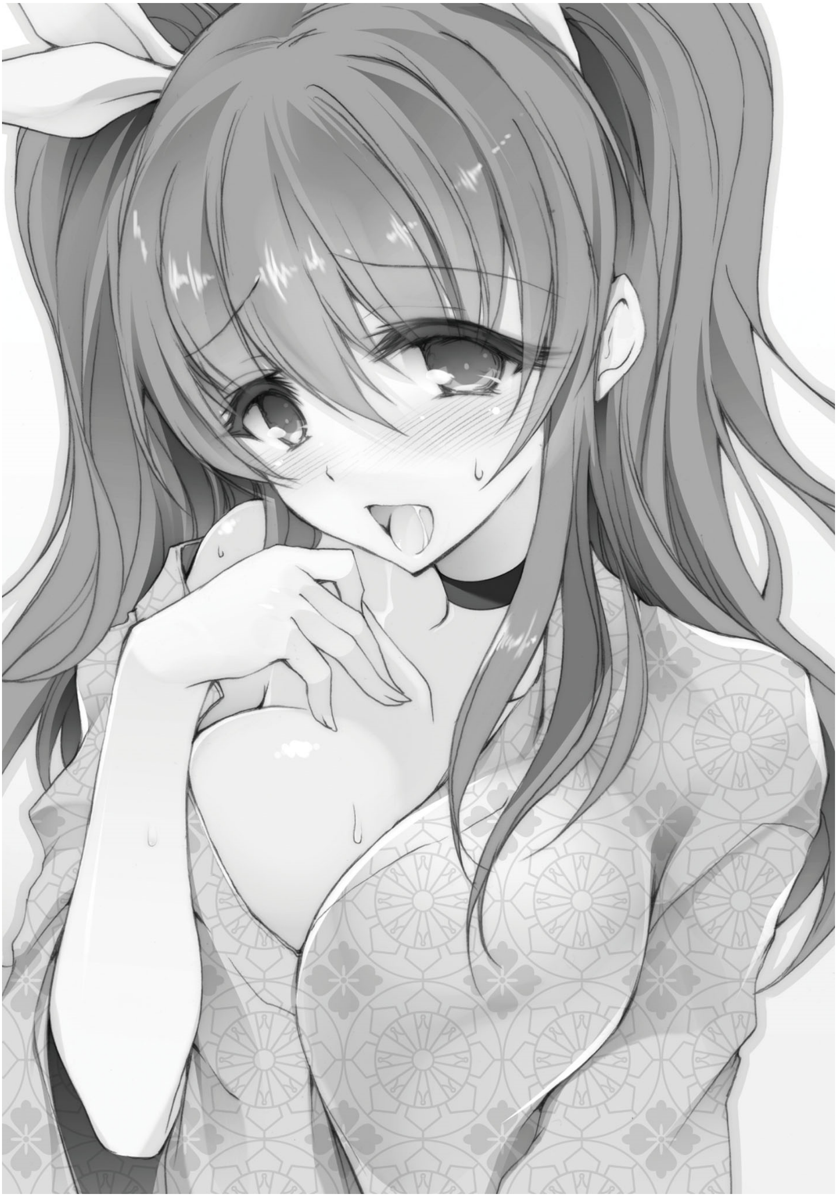
Ikki felt a little embarrassed about having discovered his lover's disposition, as though it were his own. He had never intended to punish her over such a small matter as her absence anyway. Neither was he willing to hurt the girl he held dear—so it could not be better that she derived pleasure from it.

But just as he begun to think that way—

"Haa…aha… I'm glad…."

"Stella?"

Feeling her breath hot on his ear, he pulled back a little, took a good look at her—and started.



Her face was slack, as though in a trance, her skin reddened as though with the onrush of blood, the rationality in her dim, strangely lit crimson eyes melting away like so much strawberry jelly. Undraping her right arm from Ikki's back, she reached for the shallow teeth-marks on her neck, caressing them with loving tenderness.

"…I've…been eaten up by Ikki…."

The heat in her tone and the scent of her freshly-bathed body struck

Ikki with a world-shaking sense of vertigo.

This is bad….

Clearly, he had flipped an odd switch in her. He thought that he could just about diffuse the powder-keg with a restrained bite or so, but had somehow stepped on a landmine instead. This was dangerous. For her, and for him—it was embarrassing to admit, but if things escalated from here, he was sure that their resolve to not cross the line before her parents had approved of him would break. So, expending the last of his resolve he grabbed her by the shoulders and peeled her off him.

"A-Alright! I'm satisfied! We can stop here now!"

"Aa…."

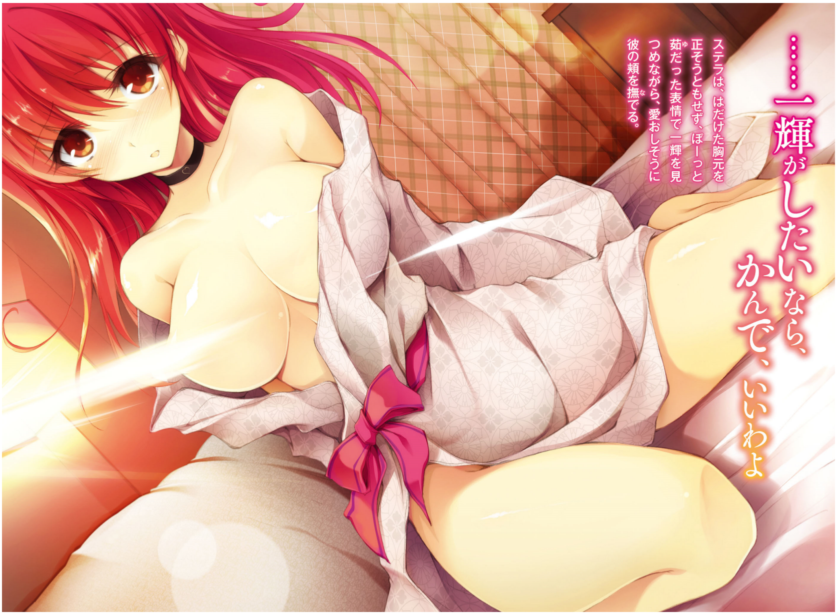
But in his haste, he used too much force. His hand slipped, sliding her yukata down and opening it up from the chest down on one side, exposing half her ample bosom. He could not help but also see to the point where her breasts ended in a discolored tip—

"U…wa…."

Ikki was dumbstruck. His throat was parched, his heart was pounding painfully in his chest. He wanted to avert his eyes. Apologize. But he could not tear his eyes away. Nor could he find words, as though Stella's immodest form was short-circuiting his reason. To make things worse…

"It's okay…."

Stella was too already far gone to stop him.


……一輝がしたいなら、かんで、いいわよ
ステラは、はだけた胸元を正そうともせず、ぽーっと茹だった表情で一輝を見つめながら、愛おしそうに彼の頬を撫でる。

"You can bite if you want to."

She made no move to correct her dishevelment, instead reaching up to stroke Ikki's face, a smoldering look in those eyes that reflected only him. Her lips curved upwards, glistening with the wetness of his saliva, allowing him free rein. Something snapped in Ikki's head. He couldn't think anymore. He didn't even know what he might do now—only that his face was slowly being drawn to Stella's breasts as she looked on lovingly, sliding her hands behind his head as she pulled him in to meet her—

Ding-dong.

The sudden doorbell was met with a pair of wordless shrieks.

Part 9

The coming of this third party was like a bucket of cold water tossed over their heads: forcibly parting their linked bodies and thoughts, they fled, each to one corner of the bed. Their excitement cooled, only to be replaced by burning embarrassment. What were they doing? What would they have done? What would have happened had the doorbell not rung? Just thinking about it gave them fits.

"Haha… is this good timing… or bad timing?"

"Y-Yeah, that's exactly it, isn't it? …Oho-hohoho."

Having parted from Ikki, Stella pulled her robe closed to the point where it seemed like she was wearing a corset as she averted her reddened gaze, her tone unnatural. It was as though she was trying to recoup her losses with that tone. Utterly futile—but that said he too had been caught up in that atmosphere. He had no leg to stand on either.

"I-In any case let's cool off a bit. After all, someone is here."

"Y-yeah. That's good"

Getting off the bed, Ikki approached the entrance. Along the way, he massaged his chest.

Th-That was close…!

If they had allowed things to go in that direction, it would have been bad. That was a pathetic showing, for having promised to not dishonor Stella's parents. To think that he would be so easily swayed by circumstances—but, well, it would have been weird if he had had no reaction to Stella when she had been like that.

Whatever it was, this visitor had saved him. It was only right for him to welcome them. And it was for the best that the two of them were not alone now. Things were just too awkward.

But who would come to his room at this time? Wondering thus, he opened the door—

"Hi, may I ask who is this?"

"Good evening. As promised, I've come to paint you in the nude."

Bam!

Slamming the door, he locked it with swiftness.

"Ikki? What happened!?"

"Some door-to-door tout."

"But we're in a hotel!"

Though somehow she could not see it, blocked as she was by Ikki's back, the person outside was not a salesman in a suit, but a blonde with unruly hair dressed in nothing but a topless apron—Akatsuki Academy's Sara Bloodlily. He seemed to have caught her eye during the attack on Hagun, and thus she had accosted him during the social party held for competitors in the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival in order to get him as a nude model for her work. And somehow it seemed like she hadn't been joking. He couldn't in any right welcome such a guest. He didn't want to pose nude. Even as he desperately pressed up against the doorknob, wondering how he could extricate himself from this situation—

"Sorry to be a bother."

The wall beside him opened, and Sara walked in.

"Eh? Eeeeh!? Where did you come in from?"

"The wall."

"No, I can see that. Why did the door open?"

"It had a knob on it."

Indeed, there was one on the other side of the wall.

He didn't even know it was there.

"How could that be!?"

She had used an ability, no doubt about that.

"I don't know what ability you used there… but why are you clinging to me like this?"

"I just said it. As we agreed, I'm here to paint you in the nude."

Sarah spoke without a trace of hesitation. She met his eyes dead-on. She was serious about it. So was he about refusing.

"But I don't remember agreeing to be painted by you…."

"Well, I promised to paint you."

"That's not a promise! We didn't make a compact! That's just you!"

"…You're surprisingly stubborn. Can't be helped then. In that case—"

"You'll give up?"

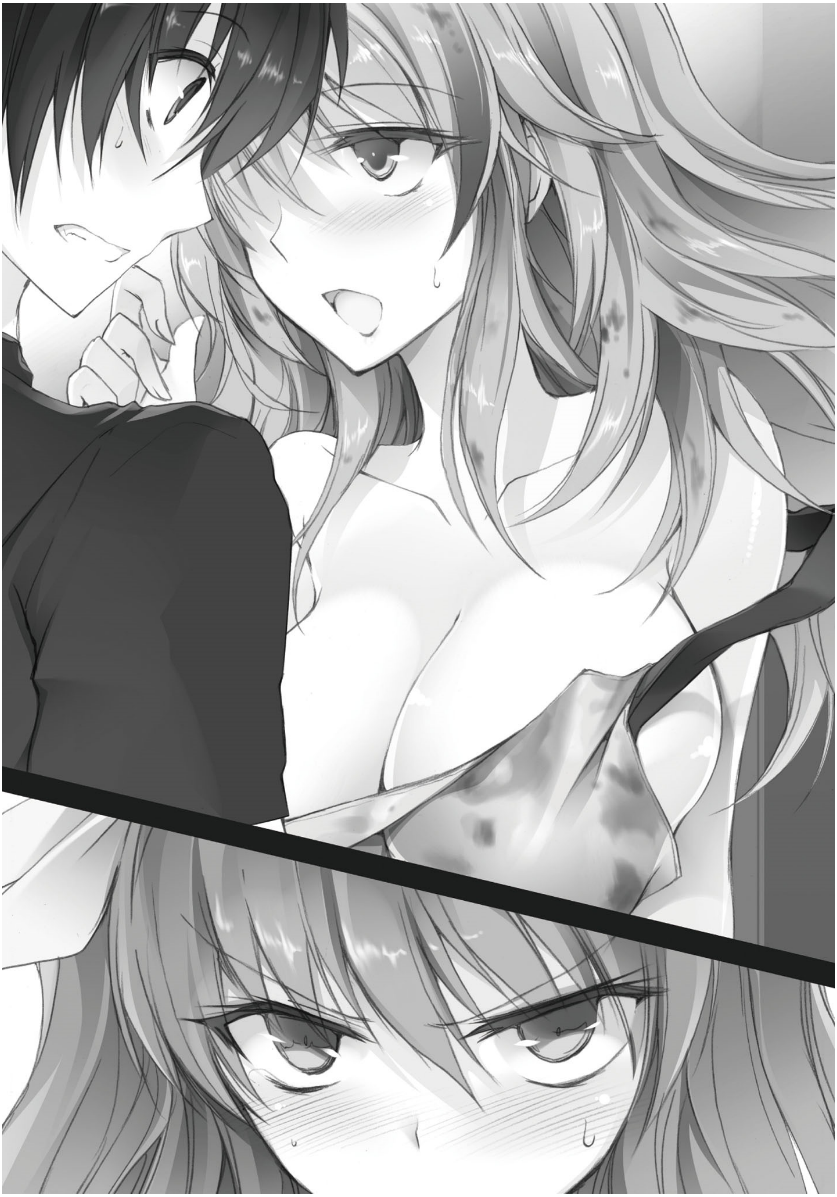
"I'll compromise—I'll strip too."

"No! That's not the kind of compromise I want! I said I didn't want to, so just give up and go back!"

"I can't."

They weren't even on the same wavelength. Sara did not back down, and indeed drew closer to him.

"…I can't have anyone else but you. Ever since I touched you that day I've only been able to think of you. No one else. Only you can satisfy me now—so please take responsibility for that."



Saying these dangerous words, she sidled her half-naked form against his chest.

"S-Sara-san, please watch what you're saying—!"

The blood drained from his face as Stella's hand clamped down on his shoulder. He turned around to see her smiling like a demon, a throbbing vein threatening to burst on her forehead.

"Oh, Ikki? I wonder what all this is about? Why's this nympho from

Akatsuki here to see you? And all that about stripping, not stripping and whatnot… it seems like the two of you have gotten really close while I wasn't around, eh?"

"Err, no, Stella…! Calm down. This is a terrible misunderstanding."

"Hehehe. What are you talking about? There's no misunderstanding—this is the tenth floor."

This is bad, she's too heated up! Her blood had all gone to her head, none of his words were getting through. Leaving aside Sara's state of dress, Stella was the sort who bore no small amount of suspicion for Ikki's own sister Shizuku. There was no way she would stay silent if some unknown woman came to her lover's place right before her eyes. He had to be straight with her. Show that he had done nothing objectionable.

"We're not close at all. It's just that during the party that you didn't attend… she, err… said that she wanted me to be her nude model."

"Eh—n-n-n-nude model!? Th-That's not happening! Definitely not! E-Even I haven't seen you nude yet!"

"That's the problem!?"

"It is! Whatever it is, I won't allow it! You're rejected, re-jec-ted! And how long do you plan to cling on to him, you nympho!? Get off!"

Roaring angrily, she pulled Sara off Ikki before pushing her away. Her balance broken, Sara landed bottom-first onto the bed, from whence she glared daggers at Stella.

"Why do you get to refuse, Crimson Princess? It's none of your business."

"It is my business! I'm Ikki's girlfriend!"

"Then it's fine. I don't intend to become his girlfriend. You can have his heart. I'm here for his body."

"His body's mine too…."

"Eh?"

"Anyway, all this 'nude model' talk sure sounds like what an artist would say, but you haven't proved you're one! For all I know, you just want to see his naked body because you're a pervert!"

At this, Sara's expression darkened significantly, as though questioning her status as an artist was some slight to her pride.

"If you're doubting my credentials, then allow me to introduce myself formally. As a lady of the imperial family of Vermillion, you should know this name."

Producing a memo pad from her denim pants, Sara wrote something on it before passing it to Stella.

"This is whom I prefer to be known as."

"A pseudonym? ...Eh? Eeeeehhh!?"

Stella's face was immediately tinged with shock. There was some kind of unknown signature inscribed on the memo pad, and she seemed to know it.

"This… it's Mario Rosso!"

"Eh, who's that? Sounds like some character from One P●ece[5]…."

"He's the most celebrated artist worldwide today. If I recall, the highest price his work could fetch over a billion."

"In yen!?"

"No, US dollars. Though since Mario was known to be a misanthropic recluse, I myself have never seen him."

"Since you've never seen this person, couldn't she be a fake?"

"That can't be. This signature is the real deal. We have one of Mario's paintings in our dining hall in Vermillion, and the signature on it is identical to this one. That painting made an magnificent impression on me, so I can recall it. To think that 'Mario' was someone who lived in the underbelly… I suppose that explains why all those people who tried to seek 'his' real identity vanished without a trace… fine, I got it."

"It's good that you understand. I'm no pervert. I simply wish to put the gallant form of my ideal man—the Uncrowned Sword King—into art with my own hands, that's all."

As though saying "so don't get in my way", she approached Ikki. But

Stella stood steadfastly between the two of them.

"...It's true that I understand that you're a first-rate artist, and to be honest I'm interested in how Mario Rosso would depict Ikki, but that's got nothing to do with it. What's more important is that Ikki doesn't want to, and so I won't allow it!"

"Stella...!"

How comforting, to have a lover like her. He had been at a loss when she had misunderstood them, but thank goodness, she had been calm. If the two of them together were to refuse, Sara would surely have no choice but to back down.

Just as he was about to heave a sigh of relief—

"If you do not get in my way, then I promise to draw a portrait of the two of you to be hung on the walls of the Vermillion palace, to wish you happiness for all your days—with you as the bride, and him as the groom."

"...Ikki. Why don't you just have this one picture drawn to commemorate your showing at the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival?"

"You were bought so easily-!?"

"It's fine. It's just art, there's no need to be embarrassed...!"

"You've got to be kidding!"

Two against one. This was bad. Very bad. In a flash, he bolted out from the room.

"Eh, Ikki, wait!"

"The model of a lifetime... I won't let you get away!"

With all his might he fled, running from his two pursuers.

Part 10

Despite having fled from the two of them, the simple structure of the hotel made it such that there was nowhere to hide. Nor any sort of place where he could elude them on foot alone. And then there was the issue of having a place to sleep. This was the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival; he couldn't simply sleep outside. But he couldn't return to his room either. So he needed to find someone else's.

His first thought was Arisuin's room, but it was too risky. Capture was all but certain.

Shizuku's room was also out. Nothing good would come of that one.

And yet it was late, and he did not have any close friends he could simply barge in on without prior notice—

"—and that's how you ended up at my place."

"Yes. One can only rely on family in such circumstances."

The room he fled to in the end was that of his brother, Ouma.

"Well, they wouldn't think to find me at your place. Could I borrow it for the night?"

"Go back."

"If I could, I wouldn't be here."

"You've got some nerve to talk like that when you're imposing on someone else."

Ikki's tone was nothing short of disrespectful, given that he was speaking to his senior. But given that his brother was openly assisting terrorists, and had even made an attempt on his own life, it was only to be expected.

"Just go over to someone else's place. Don't you have any friends?"

"You're one to talk about friends."

"...Have a little respect."

"Respect? Haha. That's a good one. Am I supposed to look up to someone who's become the errand boy for terrorists while I was away? My contempt knows no words—or are you going to spin this one for me?"

"I'm a hated man, aren't I...."

Ouma frowned as the torrent of abuse that would have made Shizuku proud spewed forth, but knowing it to be justified enough he said nothing about it.

"...Just for tonight."

He allowed Ikki entry begrundingly. The room was large, and he was unused to beds anyway. It couldn't hurt.

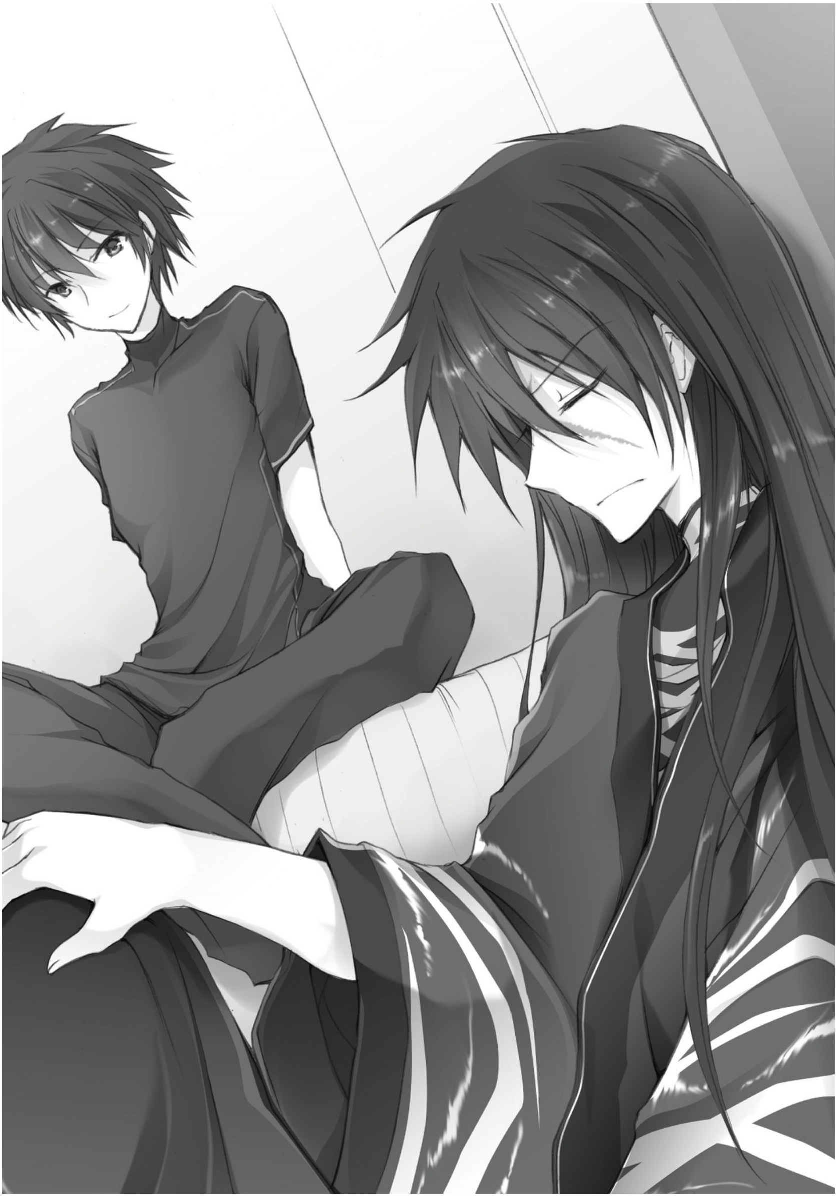
With a short "thanks," Ikki entered the room. The lights were off—it seemed that Ouma might have been headed to sleep after all. While Ikki examined the room, Ouma retrieved a bottle of mineral water from the fridge.

"Need something to drink?"

"I'm going to sleep soon anyway. I'll be fine."

"I see. Then use the bed. I'm not using it."

"Thanks for the hospitality."



Ikki sat on the bed as suggested. Ouma for his part leaned against the wall instead, seating himself on the carpet laid across the floor, and in the darkness he directed his sharp, glinting eyes at his brother.

"So, what's your real purpose? You didn't come here just to flee from them, did you?"

"...Well, kind of."

He was right. Running from Sara and Stella was his primary, but hardly the only reason he had come to his brother's room. This was after all the same person who had attacked him the previous day, and yet he was here. There had to be a fitting reason behind that decision.

"The thing is that we've always been meeting under hostile circumstances, and we haven't gotten the chance to talk at all. So I wanted to speak to you in a more civilized manner."

Ouma did not reply, but he did not reject Ikki either. Taking his silence for consent, Ikki spoke up.

"You know, I really looked up to you. You were harsher on yourself than anyone; you were the one who bore the expectations of everyone back at home; and you carried all of them with you. You could call it admiration. You were the only one worth learning from. That's why I wasn't worried when you disappeared after graduating from elementary school. I knew that you would be roaming the earth honing yourself as a warrior. Japan back then was too small for you."

Truth be told, Ouma had been unrivalled within the country and without by the time he had upped and left in his first year of middle school. Before his might, that had conquered the League's U-12 tournament by the sixth year of elementary school, his peers and even middle schoolers could do nothing. His strength as a first year of middle school might even have surpassed that of the Seven Stars Sword King of that time. For someone who pursued strength as much as Ouma, that must have been torture. And to top it all off where the rules that Japan had subscribed to when it had first entered the League: the rule that middle and elementary students could not engage in battles outside of illusionary form must have felt to him as nothing so much as choking claustrophobia. A battle in which one's life was not a stake could hardly be called such. No matter where he went, there were only kids' battles, ones that would not make him an iota closer to true strength if he fought a hundred of them. If Ikki too felt this way, there was no way that his brother had not thought so as well.

So it had not surprised him that Ouma had left home; indeed he believed it was a matter of course. The tiny Japanese junior league could not possibly satisfy him. Ikki had always been following behind his brother as he forged his own way ahead.

"But that's why it was a shock to see you showing up as a terrorist."

He glanced at his brother in the dimly-lit room.

"So why would you do something like helping Rebellion?"

This question was the reason he was here. In his memory, his brother was someone who cared nothing for plans and schemes. A warrior who advanced stoically ahead, seeking strength. Why would he take up with the underground? He needed to know.

On the other hand, Ouma seemed rather listless, but replied all the same.

"First off, I'd like to correct you. I'm not with Rebellion. I'm just a guest."

"What's that?"

"You're slow. Who's at the centre of the upheaval surrounding this Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival?"

"...Prime Minister Tsukikage."

"Correct. I am not with them, but I am on their side. And as for the reason why I'm going along with his scheme, it's because Itsuki requested it of me. 'I'd like to support Prime Minister Tsukikage's ideas', he said."

"From... Father!?"

"Is that so surprising? Tsukikage and his people lead the movement that will have Japan exit the League and regain its sovereignty. The ex-Samurai Division had their authority over the nation's Blazers taken away from them by the League. They both stand to gain from leaving the League. That there has been a blackout on information regarding our movements makes it all but obvious that there is collaboration between the two groups."

That made sense, and it wasn't as though Ikki hadn't considered it. He just couldn't think that their straight-laced father would be up for a scheme as twisted as a coup d'etat. But his brother had confirmed it, and thus their father's stance regardless the link was there. That shocked him beyond words. And speaking of surprises—

"That's odd. To think you would move on his word."

This, too, was surprising, that he would be filial to their father in this way.

Ouma made a face.

"Rubbish. I discarded our family long ago. But for the purposes of awakening the Crimson Princess that you rendered dotard, working with Akatsuki is more convenient. Fulfilling that request is just by-the-by."

"Are you embarrassed?"

"Are you seeking death?"

"Do you know what Prime Minister Tsukikage is really thinking?"

Ouma answered with his voice devoid of interest.

"I don't. And I don't want to ask."

"Huh. I guess I understand."

Ikki was comforted by this knowledge that his brother's alliance with them was not out of interest but merely of convenience. In the end, he did not wish to see his brother wrapped up in these nefarious schemes. To have kicked up all this fuss in order to have a proper match with Stella—now that suited his brother. Nonetheless—

"You seem quite taken with Stella. Your attack yesterday was about that too."

He brought up the incident the day before in which Ouma had attacked him on his way back Moroboshi's place, with the intention to eliminate him for weakening Stella.

"I was thinking that I might have been in for a fight today too. Or are we good today?"

"…There's no longer any need for it."

"What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said. You saw the matches today as well, didn't you? She's different from how she was before, she has grasped her power. To have gained so much in so little time, she must have felt that necessity—that it was necessary in order to defeat me. She has awakened from your spell, recognized who it is that she should be competing with. That is splendid—for all her potential she will not grow if she does not aim higher."

Ikki was surprised at his brother's words, and not in a good way. The one who had promised to challenge her was him. To hear Ouma claim her hard work as all 'having been for his sake' turned his stomach. But the catalyst for her improvement had indeed been her defeat at his hands. His teeth ground, but no reply would come forth from them. Yet….

"I understand why you won't attack me today, but I don't get why you're so fixated on Stella. There are people in Japan today who are clearly stronger than Stella: the Yaksha Princess and the God of War for example. If you wanted to hone yourself, one of them would be more suitable. But instead you insist on inciting her growth in this roundabout manner. What's the reason for that, I wonder?"

He still hadn't gotten a clear answer about that one. As Stella's lover, that was the part he was really most concerned about. And so he pressed in.

Ouma's gaze was mocking.

"You're missing the point That's just like you."

"Eh?"

"You completely misunderstand the concept of a knight's power. That's why you fall into using your parlor tricks so lightly."

Ouma drew himself up like a schoolmaster at the edge of his patience.

"The reason why a knight is a knight is because they possess magic. Magic is the ability to reject reason and change the world. The power to reshape the world in our image, it has been called. A person's magic capacity cannot change during their lives, and as such the impact one can have on the world, the size of the mark that one can leave on history—these have already been decided the moment one is born. People call this fate. As such a knight's Power is the ability to push back the fate of others in favor of their own. And Stella Vermillion possesses what can be considered the greatest amount of raw magical power in the world—thus there exists no greater foe than her in the pursuit of strength."

Through magic, one's fate could be realized.

This was how the modern man defined knights and their magic. And indeed, A-Rank knights had always seared their mark into legend whether for good or ill, with great deeds to match that rank. One's magic reserve was foremost in their world. Ouma's opinion was, as far as the zeitgeist would have it, not unfounded.

"But you're talking about her potential. In terms of present strength...."

"The Yaksha Princess is above her? That is so, I suppose. But in that case all I require is to rouse her potential by force. Hook her in, and then awaken her. It's that simple—and it has borne fruit. You saw it too, didn't you? That dragon. If that is indeed the core of her being, then the God of War and the Yaksha Princess may as well be nothing. This is where you have it wrong: I'm not looking for a disadvantageous battle. If I were, I could indeed challenge the Yaksha Princess. But in these five years, I have had that kind of experience far too many times already."

Ikki blinked, while Ouma continued.

"What I seek from her is not a battle that does not favor me. I seek power, power inexorable. I seek defeat, defeat inevitable. For an A-Rank knight like me, the only one who can give this to me is Stella, who possesses that absolute magic. And... if I can overcome it... if I can do that, then perhaps this hand of mine will tremble no more."

So saying, he wrapped his right hand in a vice-grip. Indeed, it shook ever so slightly. Ikki knew that trembling, born of unquenchable terror. What did he fear? Ikki could not say. But in the gloam Ouma almost seemed aflame, a zeal for battle radiating off him in waves.

...He was also glad.

He hasn't changed....

Having gotten off on so wrong a foot, he had feared that his brother might have changed utterly. But that was not so. He had not changed. He was still the man on a single-minded chase after strength. He was still the person Ikki had admired.

"I stand corrected, a little, Ouma."

"How 'little' do you mean?"

"I don't have to look at you like you're all upside-down."

"Always had to have the last word, didn't you."

Ouma furrowed his brow and closed his eyes.

"Enough chatting. I'm going to sleep. You should too."

"I will."

There was nothing more to ask.

He was concerned about the source of Ouma's fear, but they were not so close that he could ask about such a private thing.

Closing his eyes, Ikki allowed consciousness to fade. And it fled from him, its path eased by the exhaustion of the match and his lack of sleep. Just as the darkness was about to settle—

"You've caught the eye of someone very troublesome. Nothing good is going to come of it; you'd best be prepared."

His warning would be realized the very next day.

> You have unread mail: (1)
>
> From: The 72nd Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival administration committee
>
> Subj: A notice to all participants of the 72nd Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival
>
> This morning, the administration committee has received notices of withdrawal from Akatsuki Academy first-years Yui Tatara and Rinna Kazamatsuri, while fellow Akatsuki Academy first-year Reisen Hiraga has been disqualified for malicious conduct. As a result of these forfeitures, Stella Vermillion of Hagun Academy's advance to the semi-finals has been confirmed.
>
> This committee has decided that due to the reduction in the number of total

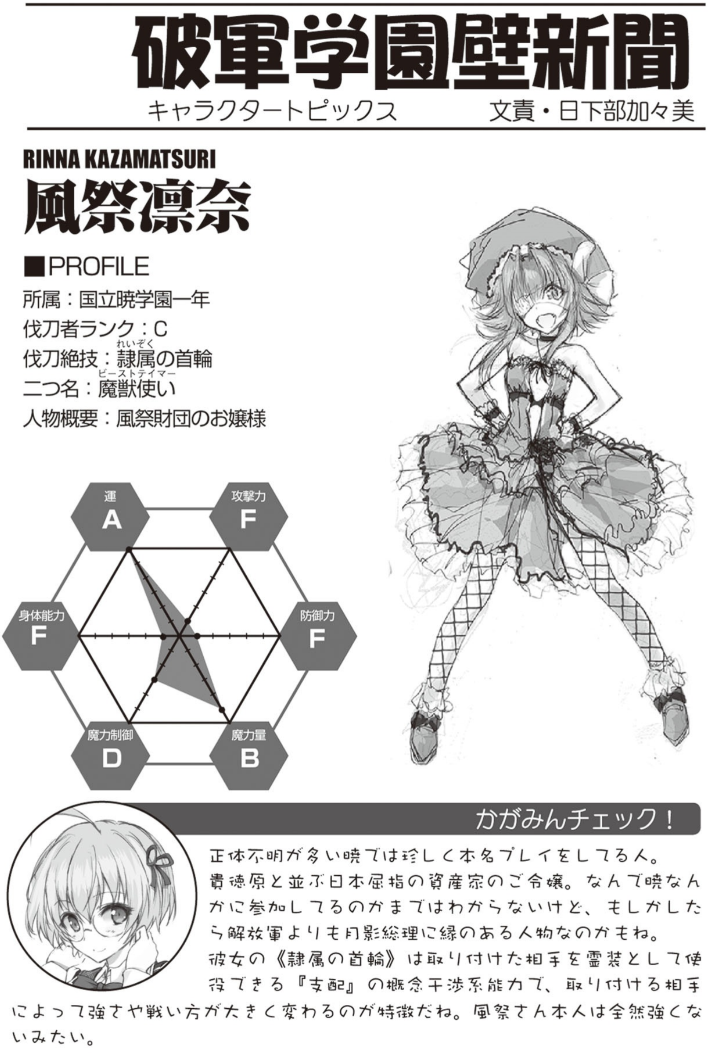
matches, the match schedule should be moved forward.

As such, it has been decided that the second and third rounds of the tournament shall be completed this day. We apologize for the inconvenience that this may cause any of the participants, and hope that you will cooperate with us on this matter.

References

1. ↑ *Bad Luck*: This uses the kanji 凶運, *Kyou Un* ("Evil Fortune").
2. ↑ *Nameless Glory*: This uses the kanji 過剰なる女神の寵愛, *Kajounaru Megami no Chouai* ("Goddess's Boundless Favor").
3. ↑ *Shiro*: "White", a nickname for Byakuya based on the first kanji of his name 白夜 ("white night").
4. ↑ *God Hand*: This uses the kanji 白い手, *Shiroi Te* ("White Hand").
5. ↑ *One P●ece*: *One Piece*, by Oda Eiichiro, an adventure manga which uses many foreign-sounding names.

Chapter 7: Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival Second Round – Begins



破軍学園壁新聞

キャラクタートピックス　　文責・日下部加々美

RINNA KAZAMATSURI

風祭凛奈

■PROFILE

所属：国立暁学園一年
伐刀者ランク：C
伐刀絶技：隷属（れいぞく）の首輪
二つ名：魔獣使い（ビーストテイマー）
人物概要：風祭財団のお嬢様

運：A
攻撃力：F
防御力：F
魔力量：B
魔力制御：D
身体能力：F

かがみんチェック！

正体不明が多い暁では珍しく本名プレイをしてる人。
貴徳原と並ぶ日本屈指の資産家のご令嬢。なんで暁なんかに参加してるのかまではわからないけど、もしかしたら解放軍よりも月影総理に縁のある人物なのかもね。
彼女の《隷属の首輪》は取り付けた相手を霊装として使役できる『支配』の概念干渉系能力で、取り付ける相手によって強さや戦い方が大きく変わるのが特徴だね。風祭さん本人は全然強くないみたい。

Part 1

Due to the change in the number of matches, the third round was moved up. Because that information dribbled out, things were greatly disordered. It was particularly important for the contenders of the second round. After all, it was the general rule that each contender would have one fight per day. Now that assumption had been overturned suddenly, and they would be forced to fight repeatedly instead. Basically, the second round would be held at 9AM, and the third at 6PM. Being told to free up that time was like dousing hot rocks with water. Naturally, there was protest. From those related to the contenders of course, as well as audience members who had already made reservations for the final day and the local businesses who had made plans for catering to Festival customers efficiently. But the administration committee did not make a satisfactory explanation, and this shortening of the schedule was forced through.

In this confusion, the second round of the 62nd Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival began. What the heck was the administration committee thinking?

—What Ikki and the others knew of this state of affairs was that in A Block's second round, Sword Emperor of Wind Ouma Kurogane and Panzer Grizzley Renji Kaga had won their respective matches. Afterwards, they joined Kagami Kusakabe of the Hagun Academy Newspaper Club.

"Ahh, there they are! Yoohoo, hey everyone!"

"Oh my, isn't it Kagamin?"

"Good afternoon, Kusakabe-san."

Having found Ikki and the other contenders, Kagami noisily ran up to them, speaking loudly.

"Haha, congrats on getting the win, all of you! Who would've though that Hagun Academy's reps would all make it through the first round! It's the first time in Hagun's history! Brilliant work, brilliant! Actually, I wanted to congratulate you yesterday, but it was frantic putting together all of the data sent to the school, and by the time I could get a break, the sun was already up~!"

"You sure are lively despite that."

Arisuin rebutted so with a light smile, and Kagami puffed her chest proudly.

"Obviously! What kind of reporter sputters out because of an all-nighter? Besides, isn't 『**Hagun's Representatives All Win Through The First Round**』 the most uplifting kind of article? Who'd get tired with something that fun and happy? Oreki-sensei told me everyone back at the academy were also celebrating loudly all night!"

"What would they be doing at school if they weren't already considered adults?"

"Ahaha, yeah really. But isn't that fine anyway? It wasn't just us yesterday. Everyone was up. Stella-chan in particular! Did you know? The percentage of people who were watching that one-on-four bout! Eighty-two percent! Even more than for the KOK A-League finals! What a shock! It was like New Years Eve! ...Oh, huh?"

Kagami's machine-gun chatter came to a stop.

Because the topic, Stella, was…

"...Auu~"

...curled up with her back against the fence, groaning.

"...Doesn't Stella-chan seem out of it? What happened? Is it that day of the month?"

Arisuin bopped the top of Kagami's head at her unrefined comment, then told Stella's reason for balling up like this.

"It's because she kicked around everyone else in B-Block, so she feels responsible for making Ikki fight more than once a day even though he can't do it."

Hearing that, Kagami's face changed in agreement.

"Ahh… I see. That's true. Senpai's ability is a huge problem in consecutive fights, isn't it…."

Whether Ittou Shura or Ittou Rasetsu, Ikki's Noble Arts didn't leave any magic power remaining once used. And he needed a day to recover enough to use them again. Undeniably, his available tactics were limited. That was drastic.

"I told her I wasn't that worried about it though. It's not like I'm the only one who has to fight multiple times. And first of all, it's not like she could predict a special exception would be made like this."

As Ikki said, this kind of decision wouldn't usually be made. The number of days in the event was abruptly truncated despite the match venue's contract and security schedule already having been set. The Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival was not just a contest for students, but an entertainment business. The administration committee's decision this time had broken every possible operation scheme surrounding the Festival. Normally, the number of matches not being enough wouldn't lead to such an unreasonable decision. So to blame this effect on Stella would be too unfair. Instead, as far as Ikki was concerned, he'd rather she reflect on betraying him by bargaining with Sara last night, but....

"...Kusakabe-san. Since you have access to the mass media information network, do you know anything about this? Why would the administration committee send down such a decision?"

"Hmm... well.... If you ask me, I could tell you, but...."

While giving that vague response to Shizuku's question, Kagami made a troubled face. And with a fleeting sideways glance toward Stella, who had been emitting such gloom this whole time that she was practically a humidifier, she spoke.

"But it's hard to say it when it might be Stella's finishing blow."

"Huh? Th-Then it really is my fault? I'm the bad one!?"

Jumping up with a bang, Stella approached Kagami blue-faced. Facing that, Kagami shook her head frantically to deny it.

"No no no! That's not it! You didn't do anything wrong, Stella-chan! This is all due to the adult world's money getting entangled in everything. But... well, you've been caught up in it."

"Kagami-san, it can't be helped if you're worried about finishing your statement here, so can you tell us anyway?"

"This is a secret, you know?"

In response to Ikki's demand, Kagami said only a few words.

"The Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival is by appearance for students and for business, but money changes hands when Blazers fight. The cost of reserving the venue. The cost of repairing damage to the facility. The cost of ensuring the audience safety. The cost of transportation maintenance or committee personnel fees or everything else—it wasn't awful without a great amount of money, but the wheels wouldn't turn without that money either. The revenue from spectators or and sponsorship advertisements was good, but not enough. So the Japanese branch of the League of Mage-Knight Nations who controlled the performance of the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival had auctioned off its broadcast rights. And with that revenue they had worked out a way to deal with various expenses. In truth, this was a festival for the youngsters who would carry the burden of this country's future, so they had not prepared the broadcast rights ahead of time, but the main headquarters of the League hated to interfere with the Japanese government's knight training, thus they had a rule which forbade accepting support money from the government. This means they won't be able to hold the exhibition. That makes all of this inevitable. But even with this situation, they still managed to make such a splendid show!"

"Through investors, right?"

"Exactly. The reason the administration committee forced this schedule shortening was because investors made an explosive objection. 'We didn't hear anything about B-Block's second and third rounds not being held! You're breaking the contract!'. And so on."

"...How difficult. In a contest between fellow humans, so it seems rare for any to abstain and lessen the number of matches."

Kagami nodded to the amazed Arisuin.

"Well, yeah. So usually neither the administration committee nor the main HQ that's backing them would listen to this kind of objection, and usually the investors wouldn't make such a nonsensical fuss in the first place. But this year is a bit different."

"Different?"

"Yeah. …I just said that they auctioned off the broadcast rights, but in practice—and this is definitely a secret—the broadcaster for the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival rotates every year, by secret agreement with the key bureau members. The main League HQ pretends to protest, but since it's an important national event, they say it's to make handing out the broadcasts fair. That's why the bidding price hardly ever changes. For the last decade, it's been kept at about five billion yen each year[1]. This has been funds the Festival administration committee uses every year. ...But this year is different. This year's committee... to put it simply, the money they made by auction was one hundred billion yen[2]!"

"A-A hundred billion!?"

"Wh-What the heck, isn't that twenty times the usual amount!? Why would it be so...."

At the extreme jump in cost, Arisuin and Shizuku almost screamed. But Ikki immediately considered the reason for this price inflation.

"—Ah, I see. That's how Stella is caught up in this, huh?"

"Your judgment is good. That's exactly right, Senpai."

"Huh? Wh-What do you mean!? Why am I involved with this money?"

Stella was bewildered, not following the conversation. Kagami explained it to her.

"It's because you're a huge world star, Stella-chan. You're a princess and a knight. That would be enough as a reason. And yet you also have an A-rank magic capacity, the highest level in the world. If we add your exceptional beauty, enough to be a national idol, it'll jump past three-of-a-kind and full house right to straight flush, you know!? Having you here completely changes the essence of the Festival show. The Festivals in the past were certainly popular, but only within Japan itself. But if the Crimson Princess Stella Vermillion, who all the world has its eyes on is attending, it's not just a performance for Japan anymore. All the countries under the League would be dragged into it as well. Naturally, broadcasters overseas would bring in money endlessly too, to get television rights!"

But in cases of large amounts of money, investors must be able to collect their money seriously. They wouldn't be working with the usual sort of finance contracts. This was a contest they couldn't afford to lose.

"In this big show, One of the main players, Stella-chan, wouldn't have some of her matches. There would be two days where Stella wouldn't show up. For investors, this is something they can't look past. So they objected. No, not something as halfhearted as objecting. Money is money. They were on the level of screaming. And the only thing the administration committee can't take is a one-sided attack regarding money."

If it's like that, then no joke, there would be deaths. And not just one or two people.

"So that's why from last night to this morning, they've been loudly disputing things, and in the end to the bidders who won broadcasting rights, the administration committee… that's to say, one day's worth of the price out of five was returned to each country, and on top of that, the schedule was condensed to remove one of the days without Stella-chan appearing. Plus one of the days schedule for the finals was changed to an exhibition match with A-League mage knights. And probably sometime today, Stella-chan will get a request to participate in that exhibition for some reason or other!"

"...I didn't know that what I did was going to have this kind of result."

Hearing that her action had triggered such huge mayhem, Stella seemed like she was about to sob.

"How should I take responsibility…?"

But to Stella who mumbled this….

"No, you're wrong!"

Kagami declared so with an unusually strong tone.

"K-Kagami?"

"It wasn't your fault that the Pierrot broke the rules, and you shouldn't feel obliged to anything just because the other two from Akatsuki decided to withdraw on their own! The administration committee recognized that this was an irregular match to begin with, and still formally permitted it. And besides… everyone at school was really happy, including me!"

"Happy…?"

"Because, Stella-chan, to beat our enemy without letting them get away, you took on such an unreasonable match, didn't you? Even though this competition is so important to you, you took on such a risk and fought for the rest of us who were too weak to do anything. When we saw you beat them up, our mood re~ally cleared up!"

Saying so, Kagami hugged Stella without holding back.

"Thank you! I like you more and more!"

"Kagamiii… yeah, I like you too."

Stella also answered Kagami's embrace.

Because of that sunny expression, she seemed freed from the unnecessary sense of responsibility—that was good. Ikki believed so from the bottom of his heart as he watched the two of them. In the first place, students shouldn't have to worry about their sponsors. Kagami who didn't fail to miss that wasn't being smooth-tongued. They simply had a good friend in her.

Ultimately, thanks to Kagami-san, Stella is fine now.

In that case, after this—is the series of mayhem. Should they go and watch how this all played out?

「And so… and so… hurt more. Bleed more. Cut more. I will cheer for that Ikki-kun until I grow hoarse. I want to see you break, break, and break as you keep on defying your fate!」

Remembering that voice, a creeping fear pricked up and down his body. Ikki knew someone who was capable of creating this kind of chaos.

"...Onii-sama. Could this be…."

It seemed that Shizuku had also reached the same guess. With a stiff face, Ikki looked up. In response, he nodded.

"Yeah, that's what I think too. He hoped for me to be at a disadvantage yesterday, didn't he?"

"Hmm? Senpai, what are you talking about? It sounds like your insinuating something."

"…As a matter of fact, something happened yesterday—"

Part 2

"The ability to make any wish come true… what the heck. Isn't that absurd…!?"

"But that kind of ability is consistent with the mysterious battle record, right? I see, I see."

The conversation with Amane, and the misfortune he created for the White-Robed Knight Kiriko Yakushi; after hearing about all of that, Stella and Kagami frowned.

"Hey, Kagami. If we informed the administration committee about this, can't we get Amane disqualified? Is interfering with an ability from outside a match the most forbidden of all?"

"Hmm… that's a strict rule, but anyway it's impossible."

"Why!?"

"We don't have any proof. Regarding everything that's happened with the money behind the scenes up to the administration committee's forced decision, there's been some irregularities, but it's still more or less within reason. That's how it's been going so far. So there's no way to produce evidence that his power intervened, even if Shinomiya-kun really did do so."

"First of all, if Amane-kun really does have such power, then any action to get him disqualified would definition end in failure."

Stella groaned at the words added by Ikki, looking as if she was going to stomp on the ground in frustration.

"Ahh~so-a-nnoy-ing! Even though he called himself a fan of Ikki, all he does is get in Ikki's way…! Since we're supposed to have time between matches, maybe we should go beat him up…!"

"If you did something like that, you'll just get disqualified yourself, you know."

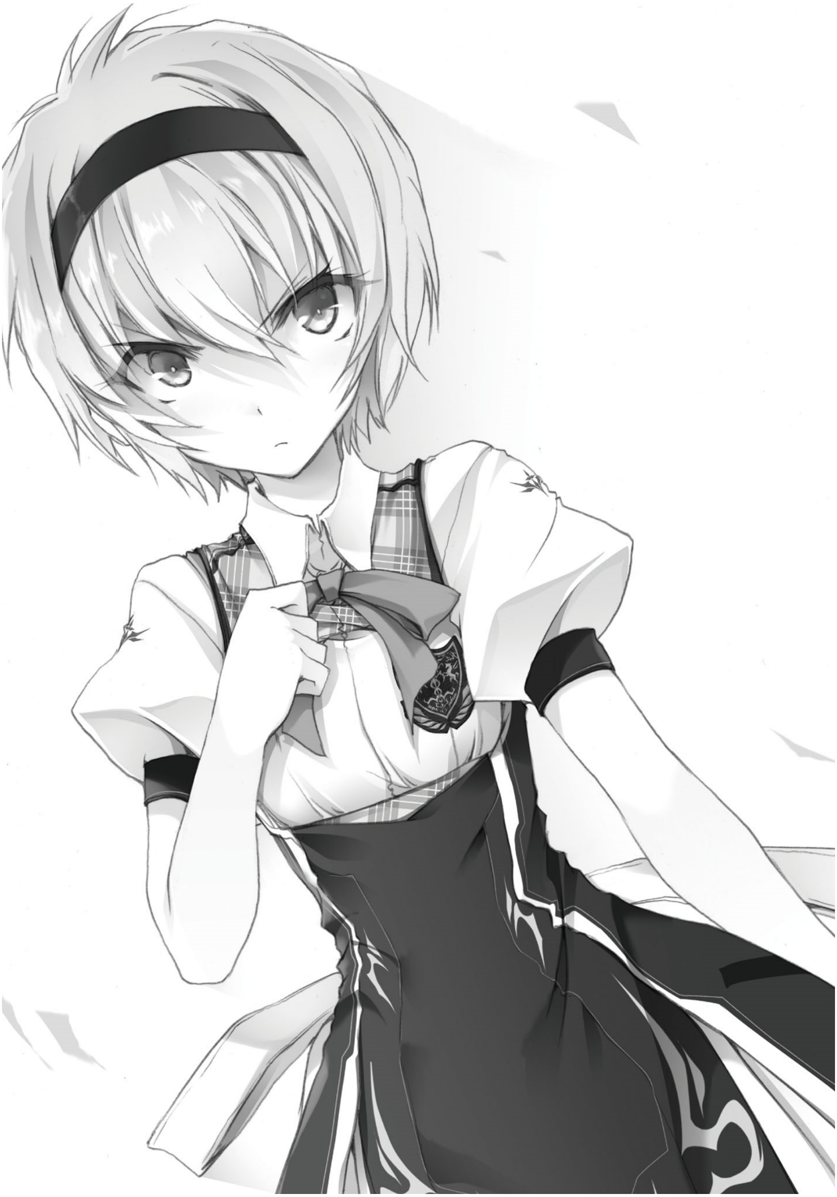
"Ugh."

At Shizuku's serene voice cutting in, Stella moaned.

But exactly as she said, Stella's elimination would be the only result for such an action.

"Well, there's no need to worry about every little thing with Onii-sama, Stella-san."

And Shizuku, who had been needling Stella, declared so.



"Because in any case, I'll kick him off the stage in this afternoon's third-round match."

Hers was a tone that flowed with confidence.

"Will you be okay, Shizuku? I don't know how we're supposed to fight something on the scale of granting any wish, so I don't have any plan. Besides, like we just heard with the White-Robed Knight, we might not know how that power manifests in battle…"

"My my, Stella-san, could you be worried about me? How surprising. Do you appreciate me now?"

At the blunt teasing, Stella's face reddened like an explosion. From anger, obviously.

"Wha!? D-Don't be stupid! That's impossible! Who'd be worried about a sister-in-law like you!? I just wanted to shut that big mouth full of confidence, so I asked if you had any basis for it!"

"Of course I have some basis. If I didn't, I wouldn't have said it."

"Huh!? Really!?"

"Yes. I've already envisioned a way to defeat his Nameless Glory."

Ikki was astonished to hear that Shizuku had already found somewhere to start in defeating Amane, but Stella showed even greater surprise, and immediately asked.

"A-And how—"

"I won't tell you."

And against Stella who was asking with all her might, Shizuku responded with a hard voice that she would say nothing more, then stuck out her tongue. Instantly, Stella's hair stood up in fiery radiance.

"Ikki—your little sister's personality is horrible! How exactly was she brought up!?"

"Hahaha… She used to be a good and meek little girl though."

"That's not true, Onii-sama. Shizuku was only ever a good girl in front of you."

Hearing something he didn't want to hear so bluntly, Ikki was just a little bit dejected. And at that exact moment—

「An announcement for all C-Block contenders. After ten minutes of intermission and clearing of the ring, the C-Block second round matches will begin. C-Block contenders, please gather in the waiting room. Again—"

The announcement resounded through the venue. C-Block was the one with Ikki registered.

"I see. Since there's no match for B-Block, after A-Block comes C. Then I should get to the waiting room."

Saying so, Ikki took a step away from the group, and all of his friends gave yells of support.

"Onii-sama, I'll pray for your success."

"There's more than one fight today, so ration your strength carefully."

"Do your best, Senpai! I'm looking forward to some good photos!"

Returning a smile to those cheers, Ikki looked toward Stella last. Stella… chewed her lips with a downcast look, wondering if she should apologize for the issue with the matches.

"...Ikki, umm…."

How should she cheer him on, when she bore some part of the responsibility for putting him in this situation? Stella was probably roiling in that complicated question.

Ikki guess so—and spoke up himself.

"It's a sign of good fortune that we're thinking the same thing, right?"

"Ah, umm, yeah?"

Her thoughts cut through unexpectedly, Stella stared back with a blank face. She probably didn't understand any part of his statement. But as far as Ikki was concerned, it was neither accident nor fluke. Because—

"We didn't expect for the final battle we wanted so badly to move up by one day. What's that, if not good fortune? All this time, whenever I see your face, I can't help but boil inside… and aren't you the same?"

Ikki said these words with a quiet fighting spirit burning blue in his eyes. At those words, Stella widened her scarlet eyes at once.

"Yeah, of course!"

She replied with a shining smile. Her scarlet irises were no longer averted, staring straight at Ikki with emotions aflame. And Stella, with her tone back to normal, tapped Ikki's shoulder with one fist.

"I know you won't lose!"

"Right… I got it."

And so Ikki strode forward to his match, to the stage of the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival's second round—

Part 3

In the Bay Dome where the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival was being held, there were two gates facing each other, one red and one blue. The Festival contenders were divided evenly between the two gates, held in the respective waiting rooms behind each gate to await the announcer. The decision of which gate a particular participant would go to was sent each morning by mail from the administration committee. In Ikki's case, he had been behind the blue gate yesterday. Today was red. It was a bit inconvenient to change the appointed place every day, but this was just a match formality, and it couldn't be helped that the room he'd be waiting in and the people he'd be waiting with changes every time—yes, in other words.

This sort of thing would inevitably happen, huh~

While sitting down on a folding chair in the dreary waiting room, Ikki nervously and hesitantly peeked at the situation. It was a seven-by-fifteen meter bare concrete room. There, a bare-chested young man with a death's head tattoo was plopped in a folding chair, his legs crossed—Donrou Academy third-year, Sword Eater Kuraudo Kurashiki. The one who the girl named Ayase Ayatsuji had been locked in battle with, and Ikki's fated opponent. Furthermore, with the eight original people of C-Block reduced to four, and the four divided between the two gates, there was nobody else in the room. Two opponents fated to meet in furious combat, alone in the same room before a match. Naturally, there wouldn't be any conversation… the atmosphere was as heavy as lead. Besides—

Umm… he's been glaring this way the entire time.

Kuraudo had been scowling in Ikki's direction with his brow creased since Ikki entered the room. Even if Ikki couldn't read his mind, the veins bulging on his forehead were plainly visible.

He… he's not going to charge at me, right?

Ikki, who knew Kuraudo's wild temperament and had earned Kuraudo's hate, was in a state of tense suspense. And after spending about an hour in that state of both mental and bodily disquiet….

「An announcement for contenders standing by in their waiting rooms. The time has come for C-Block's second round matches to begin. Contenders Sara Bloodlily and Kuraudo Kurashiki, please proceed to your respective gates.」

…the announcer invited the contenders to their match. Finally, the tension of being in the same cage as a hungry lion was released. Thinking this, Ikki heaved a breath of relief—

"Haa…."

—and at the same time, Kuraudo also released a huge sigh.

"…Finally, I can get outta this room, huh?"

As if Kuraudo was revealing relief from the bottom of his heart. Maybe he was just as hesitant toward Ikki as Ikki had been toward him… no, that wouldn't be the case.

"Man, it sure was hard stopping myself from beating you to death the second I saw your face."

Eek!

Hearing Kuraudo's real reason made Ikki's complexion turn bad.

"…Thanks for your patience."

"No problem. I already decided getting disqualified here would be a pain in the ass. There's just one fight between now and us going at it today. I'll butcher you then…!"

"You're surprisingly confident, but shouldn't you be thinking about your current opponent? Sara Bloodlily is from Akatsuki… in other words, she's a terrorist from Rebellion. She's not someone you can deal with normally—"

"That's none of your business."

Kuraudo declared so with no hesitation in his voice.

"I don't care about who or what that girl is. That ain't important to me. The only thing I'm here for is my match with you."

In an instant, Kuraudo's body erupted in fighting spirit and magic power that raised goosebumps all over Ikki's skin.

"I came here to fight you. I've been training for two months to pay you back. Getting stronger to win against you…!"

The rising fighting spirit and magic power grew with the voltage in Kuraudo's words, changing in color as he focused it in his right hand.

The magic power filled with the intent to do battle took shape for combat, into a skeletal sword made of bone formed like a great serpent—the Device *Orochimaru.*

"Wha…!?"

Ikki unintentionally released a gasp upon seeing the Device. Why? This wasn't the first time he's seen *Orochimaru*. The reason was in Kuraudo's left hand. Somehow, Kuraudo was holding a Device of exactly the same shape in his left hand as in his right.

"T-Two sword style…!?"

That was impossible. Certainly there were Blazers who could develop their Devices, but that was because those Devices had that kind of nature. Sword Eater Kuraudo Kurashiki's Device *Orochimaru* was a single sword. It wasn't like Arisuin's Device that could be split into multiples. If that had been the case, Kuraudo would certainly had fought Ikki previously using two sword style. After all, Sword Eater's Marginal Counter would be much more suited for two blades than a single one. Furthermore, if one looked carefully, one could see that the Devices themselves had changed. Previously, Kuraudo's *Orochimaru* had saw-tooth edging on one side, giving it a shape close to a hatchet. But now, *Orochimaru* had an edge on both sides, like a Western blade.

—The Device had changed this much. It was beyond common sense, because a Device reflected a Blazer's inner spirit, his personal values and aesthetics, his personality and lifestyle—how could it be changed to this degree? It couldn't be. Imaging the determination and the kind of training Kuraudo had undertaken to abandon all he had been, to kill off all he had been so completely was…!

But he must have done so. To win against Ikki. To catch up to Ikki.

"Kurogane… you better make it. I'll be waiting. Once you get there, we're gonna have another go. We're gonna have that kind of fun again…!"

Ikki's lips curled upward. His chest grew hot. He was happy. Someone had gone this far to win against him. In that case—

"Yeah, I will. Definitely."

There was no reason to refuse this challenge.

"…Ha ha ha."

Hearing Ikki's answer, Kuraudo laughed in satisfaction, turned on his heel, threw open the door to the entrance gate, and left the waiting room. The sword spirit swelling from his back was already no longer that of a delinquent. It had been honed to that of a top-grade swordsman. Ikki, for verified this, quivered.

"The Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival really is the best."

Not a single person here was simple. Not a single person here was halfhearted. There were only battles where not even a bit of complacency was permitted. And so, he would face off with all that he had. Ikki decided this, gazing at Kuraudo's distant back.

Part 4

「Ahh… thank you for waiting! The contenders for the first match of C-Block's second round are now heading for their gates!」

At the announcement, cheers swelled through the venue. Amid the gushing applause—

「First to appear from the red gate is Donrou Academy third-year contender, Kuraudo Kurashiki! His Marginal Counter is an impregnable defense that surpasses natural limits! His flexible serpentine Device *Orochimaru* gives him mastery of range! Having taken countless victories with these two advantages, he was named "Sword Eater"! Will this bloodthirsty wolf's fangs cut his enemies to pieces today as well!?」

Amid the cheers of the great audience, Kuraudo walked to the ring's perimeter with strong steps, then stepped onto the artificial grass. Seeing that, Stella who was in the audience suddenly tilted her head in confusion.

"Huh?"

"Did something happen, Stella-san?"

"...That guy is… using two swords…."

"Oh my my? That's certainly strange, isn't it? And I get the feeling that his Device is different from what's in my information."

Carried in Kuraudo's hands were two bone swords. But they were inconsistent with his weapon in Stella's recollection. It was the same for Kagami. That's why the two had confused expressions, but—

"Aren't you worried? I hadn't heard of a Device changing like that."

"I heard that sometimes a Device changes because a knight lost his memory during an incident. Well, it's not a common thing. Maybe we're misunderstanding it? Or maybe he always could use two swords, but didn't back then?"

Arisuin and Shizuku, who had not been a part of the matter with Ayase Ayatsuji, did not feel the same confusion. Indeed, it was not common for someone to change his own soul's nature by will. But Kuraudo decided to do so, simply to win against Ikki. But Stella and Kagami did not judge it this way.

"Huh? Is that how it is? I have a hunch that's not the reason though."

After considering the question, Stella gave up thinking about it. It wasn't necessary information at this point. And anyway, another Blazer had appeared in the ring at this time. From the ink-like darkness, there came a swirl of unkempt blonde hair. That was—

「And now! From the blue gate, Akatsuki Academy first-year contender, Sara Bloodlily! As usual, it's hard to find an appropriate place to look! It's like she'll become naked if she moves even a little bit suddenly. Will the broadcasting code allow it!? This looks to be a match that a portion of our audience will have to skip watching!」

"What's this announcer going on about?"

Stella coughed in exasperation at the juicy commentary. And Kagami added some of her own.

"No, no. Sara-chan is surprisingly popular in online forums, you know? For her amazingly provocative attire of course, but also for her charisma."

"...Somehow I don't think I get understand how the world thinks."

While useless conversation continued above, the two people in the ring came to their starting positions.

「Now then, the first C-Block match for the 62nd Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival's second round, Contender Kuraudo Kurashiki versus Contender Sara Bloodlily!」

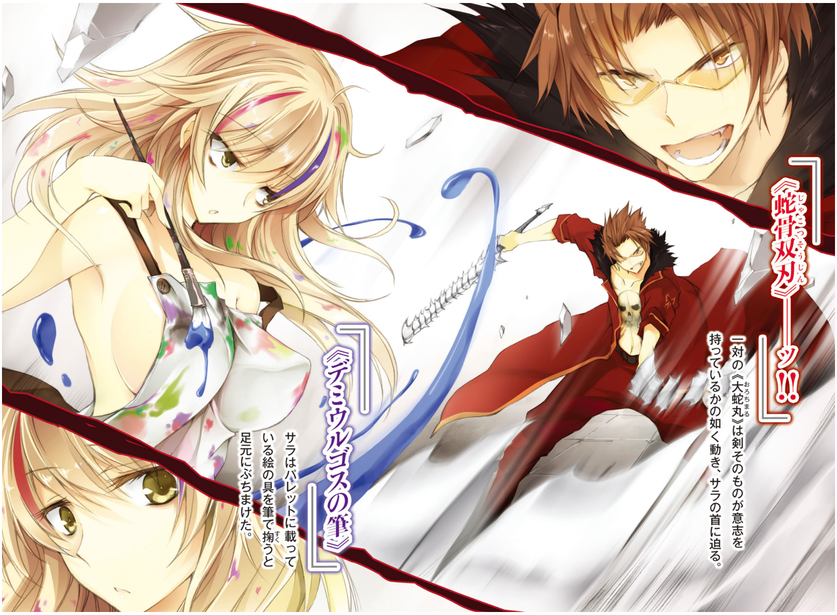
「LET'S GET STARTED—!」

The signal to begin the match rang loudly.

Part 5

"Ha ha!"

The one who moved at the same time as the starting signal was Kuraudo. Swinging the two blades of *Orochimaru,* he crossed the twenty meters separating him from his opponent at the beginning of the match.


「《蛇骨双刃》──ッ!!」
一対の《大蛇丸》は剣そのものが意志を持っているかの如く動き、サラの首に迫る。
「《デミウルゴスの筆》」
サラはパレットに載っている絵の具を筆で掬うと足元にぶちまけた。

"Jakotsu Soujin—!"[3]

With speed that the eye could not follow, he sent his blades through those twenty meters in an instant. Indeed, his Device *Orochimaru* can stretch and contract at will. Everything with the hundred-meter diameter ring was within his range. The paired blades of *Orochimaru* moved as if they had wills of their own, and approached Sara's neck. The saw-teeth edges turned as they flew the course toward taking Sara's head from her shoulders.

But Sara also moved.

"Brush of the Demiurge." [4]

What manifested was a palette of colored paint and a worn-out brush stained with pigment. This was the Device of the Bloody Da Vinci, Sara Bloodlily, Brush of the Demiurge. Sara dabbing a spot of light blue paint from her palette—

"Color of Magic—Aqua Blue of Water Surface."[5]

—and scattered the paint on the ground at her feet, turning the green of the ring there blue. In the next instant—her body submerged into the aqua blue with the sound of a water droplet.

A moment later, the bone blade aiming for her neck struck in vain. Kurauda strained his eyes searching for the enemy that had disappeared in an instant. But in another instant, something burst out from the water behind him in his blind spot with a splash. Of course, it was Sara Bloodlily who had disappeared into the aqua blue before. She had been swimming across the ring using Color of Magic, and got into Kuraudo's blind spot, and—

"Color of Magic—Fire Red of Brilliant Blaze." [6]

Dabbing scarlet paint with the tip of her brush, she swung her arm and threw the paint at Kuraudo's back. Despite the amount that she threw from her brush, what poured onto Kuraudo seemed to be a paint bucket's worth of color. But—

"Ha!"

To Kuraudo, who had been born with the superhuman reflexes called Marginal Counter, surprise attacks were meaningless. Even if one came from behind, even if it attacked his blind spot, Kurado's more than capable of evading. He dashed away from that spot, dodging the descending paint. Paint was once again scattered upon the ring. And as it flew, the magma-like color spurted fire, disintegrating the ring where it landed.

「Th-This is amazing…! An exchange of such dangerous techniques as soon as the match started!」

「Neither Contender Kurashiki who aimed to decapitate Contender Bloodlily, and Contender Bloodlily who responded with fiery Color of Magic, hesitated at all. This will likely be a hard match for the main referee to interrupt.」

"Hey, Kagami."

Suddenly, Stella who was watching the match from the audience seats asked something to Kagami who was sitting next to her.

"I haven't been paying attention to any matches besides the one I'll have with Ikki, but exactly what kind of ability does Sara have? She pulled out all kinds of stuff in an instant."

"Hmm, well, from the data while she was in Rokuzon, her Blazer rank was C. Her Blazer ability was manipulating concepts through color. For example, the exchange just now used aqua blue for water, a spell for creating a lake. And fire red for flame, a spell for invoking heat where she puts the color."

This was information that Kagami got by exchanging data with the Rokuzon Academy Newspaper Club. Since there was no reason for Rokuzon to hold back information on an Akatsuki member who had betrayed that academy, one could say this information was very likely accurate.

"That's very versatile, isn't it."

"True. She has as many abilities as she has colors. Because of that diversity in ability, Rokuzon Academy called her… 'Kaleidoscope'."

Part 6

"What a pain…. I wanted to get this over with quickly…."

Standing in an untouched section of the charred ring, Sara muttered and gazed bitterly. A feeling of disinterest and boredom drifted from her entire body. That was only to be expected. Her head as currently filled with the thought of finally having found her ideal model. She wanted to study it closely. She wanted to touch and lick and eat it, as raw as possible. That interest was suppressing everything else, especially her inclination to dirty her hands with other matters. And this obsession was especially strong for an artist. She was already showing loss of control. For Sara, there was usually no chance that she would be so negligent in this kind of match.

"…Don't run around…."

So thinking only of ending this quickly, Sara once again took aim at Kuraudo who had dodged her Fire Red of Brilliant Blaze. However —

「What a haphazard attack from Contender Sara! Even though Color of Magic had previously been launched from a blind spot, this time she's throwing it all straight from the front! But how would it be able to hit…!?」

Exactly so. Even a normal person without Marginal Counter would probably be able to dodge such a sloppy attack. Naturally it wouldn't hit Kuraudo, who casually jumped to the side to avoid it,

"Ha ha! This girl's not even listening to—!?"

Suddenly, he pitched forward.

「Oh! What's this!? Contender Kurashiki was dodging, but suddenly stopped!?」

Why was that? Why did he stop his evasion? No. He didn't stop himself. Something stopped him. How it was done was instantly visible.

「Iida-san! Please look at Sword Eater's feet!」

There, a white line that no one had been aware of was connecting Sara straight to Kuraudo's feet.

"Color of Magic—Silk White of Steady Guidance."[7]

That was the concept of setting a path. It was a road of color that could not be stepped away from. And since the color of brilliant blaze that had been thrown before was used to completely surround this span of ground, Kuraudo was not able to dodge this. But—

"Then I just gotta run down this road—!"

Kuraudo wasn't the least bit hesitant. With his inborn reflexes and his highly trained body, he immediately recovered from his stumble, and immediately strode forward down the path spread before him! And against the scarlet color that was burning down on him—

"Hebigami—!"

—he swung his sword. It was Kuraudo's self-taught swordsmanship that had previously cornered Ikki, an instant counterattack that slashed from both left and right with the sword in his right hand empowered by his inborn Marginal Counter. But now, Kuraudo released it with both hands. Four instant counterattacks in total. The paint falling onto Kuraudo was slashed apart into a spray of color. No specks were missed by Kuraudo's vision, and as they spun through the air, he continued forward without trouble, charging toward Sara on the other end of the path.

Sara probably didn't consider the possibility that someone would be coming at her this way, advancing while warding off her attack. In her surprise, her movements became dull. Naturally, Kuraudo didn't miss this observation. Dashing down the white line with force, he swung his sword, striking Sara with all his might. Against that level of power and strength, Sara was knocked off her feet to spin in midair, and she flew for ten meters before rolling to a stop on the ground.

Part 7

「Contender Kurashiki's *Orochimaru* has finally connected! He's made the first hit! Contender Sara goes down from a strike like a traffic accident! Was it fatal!?」

「...No, please look. She's standing up.」

As Muroto said, Sara stood up as if nothing had happened. Upon close inspection, her body was unscratched and not a drop of blood had been shed. How? The reason was on her left arm—where Kuraudo had struck, her arm was covered in paint.

"Color of Magic—Gunmetal Gray of Rigid Steel." [8]

Sara had turned her own arm into steel, and nullified the cutting attack. Bringing back his sword, Kuraudo who had tactile sense beyond that of other humans clicked his tongue.

"Tch. Weird techniques one after the next."

Against so many different techniques up to this point, how would he continue fighting? And yet—the one who got this far was Kuraudo. This fact gave him confidence, straightening his back. He would continue.

"I'll get through this!"

「Seeing an unhurt enemy, the Sword Eater begins again without hesitation!」

「Good judgment. The defense against the previous attack was exceptional, but it can't be maintained continuously. If one attack doesn't settle things, you can only continue attacking until it's done!」

Kuraudo displayed a persistent chain of attacks. Under that, Sara Bloodlily could be seen as being slowly pushed back—her face was lowered as if hanging her head without looking at Kuraudo pilling on force.

"...tating...."

She mumbled something. That voice—it spoke complaints like the dried lips of a ghost.

"...Irritating.... Even though I have a lot of painting to do, even though I have only seventy years of life or so to spend on all of it, there's been only nuisances. This is a nuisance. Even though I want to paint him even one minute, one second sooner... to study himmm... even though I don't have any interest in you....!"

In an instant, Sara's downcast face snapped upward.

"Don't waste my tiiiime!"

Bloodshot eyes filled with hatred and lost patience stabbed toward Kuraudo, and a right hand holding *Brush of the Demiurge* moved so quickly that observers couldn't follow. With that, something was drawn in the empty air. It was a messy picture that a child could make with a crayon. But—everyone in the hall realized what it was instantly, because in the next moment, the image drawn in midair took on solid form, escaping from artwork into the real world and falling into Sara's left hand. What she now clutched was—no, what she had created, was—

"Purple Caricature—Thompson."[9]

It was perhaps the world's most famous drum-fed machine gun.

「Wh-What is thiiis!? I-It's a gun! Contender Sara drew a gun in midair, then made it real! What kind of Noble Art is this!? I heard she manipulates the concept of color, but there was no data about Kaleidoscope Sara Bloodlily having this kind of ability! This is a hidden power she's never shown before!」

「Hey hey, can you even do that!?」

「Her ability isn't just about colors!?」

Despite previously being known as part of Rokuzon Academy, the Bloody Da Vinci Sara Bloodlily as publicly showing her Noble Art, Purple Caricature, for the first time to the astonishment of the crowd. But the one most surprised was Kuraudo. And Sara aimed her Thompson at Kuraudo, pulling the trigger. When she did, the gun—as if it was no different from a real one—emitted intense muzzle flashes and resounded with explosions of gunpowder.

"Kuh!"

A stream of full-auto fire at a rate of eight hundred shots per minute. Had the Sword Eater stopped at a distance, he could have protected himself completely even from this. But—when he charged in recklessly, he put himself too close!

「Terrible gunshots we can hear even from the broadcasting station! Contender Sara fires ceaselessly without mercy! Contender Kurashiki will definitely die—n-no!?」

Unexpectedly, the announcer's tone flipped. Because—

"GRRAAAHHHHH!"

「A-Amazing! Contender Kurashiki took the attack! Swinging his two skeletal swords, he's cutting down all the bullets in a shower of sparks—!」

Indeed, it was true. Kuraudo had shortened the length of *Orochimaru* into two daggers, and deflecting all of the Thompson's full-auto shots at very close range. At this, even Muroto was at a loss for explanation.

「It really is amazing. A feat that only he, with Marginal Counter, could perform.」

And for Kuraudo who was enduring Sara's fierce attack with a heart-ripping scream, an opportunity came. Suddenly, a blunt *click* resounded, and Sara's barrage ended. There was no need to confirm the reason.

She's out of bullets!?

With this excellent chance, Kuraudo switched completely to offense.

"Extend, *Orochimaru*—!"

Growing from its shortest length, the blade of *Orochimaru* shot outward with great force, aiming at Sara's heart. Sara's physical ability was not at Kuraudo's level. She could not avoid the extending *Orochimaru*, which had just been able to keep up with her fast bullets. And yet—at the instant the point of the sword would have arrived at her heart, *Orochimaru* veered away in its trajectory, stabbing into the ground next to her.

"Huh!?"

Even Kuraudo was confused by this. He surely extended *Orochimaru* straight forward. Such strange behavior should not have occurred. So why did the trajectory change…!?

But Kuraudo instantly realized the answer. Upon closer look at the ground where *Orochimaru* was stuck, a bulls-eye target had been drawn there.

So it was pulled into the target…!?

Via the concept of "target" and "aim", *Orochimaru* had been forced to shift its mark. It was the same as with a gun. In other words…

This girl is definitely… not just using colors! She can manipulate any concept she draws…!

Illusions that paint over reality. That kind of artistry was not unlike divine creation. Demiurge's—a false god's brush. Wasn't it a very appropriate name? And Kurashiki's surprise didn't end there. Because—

"Purple Caricature—"

—the next illusion was being drawn at that very moment, aimed at him.

Floating next to Sara Bloodlily was a white and long pole-like thing. No doubt it was—

"—Tomahawk." [10]

—a missile. Naturally, there was no possible way for a pair of swords to deal with something like this.

A flash and a roar and an explosion of heat reached into the sky above Osaka.

Part 8

At the moment of detonation, screams of agony sounded from all over the venue.

「D-Direct hiiit! What an immense blast from the cruise missile! It looks like the audience was protected by mage-knights, but the ring is so covered by flame and smoke that we can't see a thing! Is Contender Kurashiki safe…!?」

「No, he must be dead!」

「Even if that's true, there's no trace of him left!」

Naturally, because a Tomahawk was a cruise missile designed to destroy battleships or fortifications. It was not firepower for use against a single individual. A direct hit from that would leave not a single piece of meat behind.

And yet—

「Eh?」

As the black smoke cleared from the venue, it slowly became possible to see the ring, and both the audience and the broadcasters swallowed a breath. In the ring, Kuraudo was indeed not there. Well, that was expected. Anyone could've predicted that. But if so, then what was **that**?

Where Kuraudo had been standing, something that looked like a white cocoon was….

And in the moment everyone was thinking over the question, it was answered. The cocoon that had appeared in the ring began to come apart slowly. Layers upon layers of white ribbon separated with rustling noises. If one looked very, very closely, the ribbons that made up the cocoon… were blades. White blades of bone that didn't catch the light. And what came out of the cocoon was—an uninjured Kuraudo Kurashiki.

「Wh-What is thiiis!? Contender Kurashiki isn't wounded at all after taking a cruise missile's direct hit! How can this be!?」

「It appears that since the Device *Orochimaru* can be lengthened or contracted at will, he wrapped it around his body, and allowed it to absorb the explosion. Devices are not things that chip or break easily, so they can be used as shields to take blows. 」

Indeed, what Muroto said was surely true. Kuraudo discerned that he couldn't use a sword to match a missile, so he drew *Orochimaru* as long and thin as he could to use as material for an improvised shelter. But this was also a feat that only Kuraudo with his Marginal Counter could perform. Actually, the timing was truly tight.

"...What a ridiculous thing to do."

Kuraudo scowled at Sara who must be standing in the drifting smoke. He was going after her life mercilessly as well, but Sara didn't have any concern for limits. To bring such massive firepower to kill a single person was—

As Kuraudo was cursing her, the black smoke in front of him shifted in the breeze, and he saw....

Muzzles of military machine guns were pointed at him by an army corps of over a hundred skeletons.

"Purple Caricature—Necro Battalion." [11]

"This girl... really is way too much...."

That instant, the hundred or so muzzles fired a storm of lead that couldn't be compared to the density or speed from before. All of it hit Kuraudo, to punch his body into a honeycomb.

Part 9

"Wha...!?"

Gun barrels in formation. Seeing Kuraudo swallowed by the storm of lead flying from those barrels in unison, Ikki leaped up from his folding chair, sending it crashing to the ground. Was he seeing Kuraudo's gruesome last moments?

—No.

"I-It can't be…."

What spilled from his trembling lips was surprise. The bullets certainly hit. Such a dense barrage would definitely turn a human into not just a honeycomb, but ground meat. That was certain, but Kuraudo was standing calmly inside that storm of lead as if it wasn't affecting him at all.

「Wh-What is this!? Are we really seeing this, or is it a dream…!? Contender Kuraudo should've been devoured by the undead army's fire…! But he's standing! No, not just standing… he's walking! Inside the horizontal rain of lead, he's calmly continuing forward, approaching Contender Sara Bloodlily—!」

At this spectacle, even Sara was shaking with her mouth open. Inconceivable. It was a barrage of lead with no gaps to hide in. Kuraudo had blocked the automatic gunshots from the Thompson, but this was not an amount of bullets that he could deal with. No, Kuraudo wasn't even swinging his sword right now. He was only carrying *Orochimaru* in his hands. In other words, he was taking hundreds of machine gun shots without defending himself. Then how was he standing? How was he facing this?

The method—was something only Ikki Kurogane in the arena waiting room knew. Kuraudo was indeed not making any attempt to dodge, just as he appeared. His body was exposed to the barrage defenselessly. And yet the bullets were not gouging out his flesh—they were veering aside. The moment any touched Kuraudo's body, it glided past over his clothing, flowed around him without wounding. No—they were being made to do so.

…Kurashiki-kun figured it out somehow while learning swordsmanship. He realized that two-sword style was an excellent fit for his ability. There must have been someone to point it out, and more than anything his previous aggression and sharpness isn't there anymore. What's here now is a swordsman's well-honed spirit. But how… how can it be… the one behind Kurashiki-kun is… you…!?

Ikki knew. A certain genius swordsman's perfect defense of grasping the flow of everything in nature, perceiving their subtleties to ward off each and every attack, derived after half a lifetime of risk—

Ayatsuji Single-Sword Style secret technique—Ten'i Muhou.

…That's right, Ayatsuji-san said that she was going to spend summer vacation with her father while he was in rehabilitation, but he sent her away.

That's right. That's how it was. If he had a student like this, he'd instantly be sentenced to death as a matter of family judgment. To teach somone who had half-killed him, what was the Last Samurai thinking? Ikki couldn't get that far into his head, but even so—

"A-Amazing…."

At Kuraudo's talent, words of admiration spilled from Ikki's mouth. This was something he couldn't imitate. Ikki's Ten'i Muhou would never be able to divert this many bullets. In fact, back at the training camp while fighting the Pierrot's rock puppets, many of them had attacked him at once, and he had taken hard blows he couldn't dodge. Yet Kuraudo was eluding hundreds of attacks completely. This was a feat that his Marginal Counter allowed. Ten'i Muhou and Marginal Counter had great synergy. Ordinary attacks were now probably already unable to even scratch him.

"...Tch. After a missile, now it's a whole brigade. Coming up with this and that, are you Dora●mon[12] or something? This was a trick I finally managed to get so I could use it on that bastard in our match."

While calmly walking within the hail of bullets, Kuraudo spat bitterly. It seemed that he wanted revenge for having been knocked unconscious back then, coughing and pissing blood while undergoing hellish training that was likely potentially fatal, all for a secret technique that he finally mastered at the edge of death and sanity, for something to astonish Ikki with in their fight.

Against that, Sara's soldiers raised the density of their barrage even more. But—all of it flowed around him, and Kuraudo's skin wasn't even lightly torn.

"Useless useless useless! No matter how much lead you send flying straight at me, it's all wasted effort! That kind of thing's not gonna stop me!"

To give a swordsman clad in Ten'i Muhou a fatal strike, one must deliver a cut backed by skill and force. But Sara was a painter. Naturally, she could not use a sword, and so she couldn't stop Kuraudo's advance!

"Hey, you said something interesting a while ago, didn't you? That you weren't interested in me. That I was a nuisance. What a coincidence… I think the same thing. I only care about the guy after you. I'm not even thinking about a small fry like you. So—

—get the hell out of my way!"

With that roar, Kuraudo began rushing toward Sara who was still standing behind the skeleton army stretched out before him. Naturally, the undead soldiers descended upon him with bayonets to stop him, but—

"Mooovvveee!"

Kuraudo extended *Orochimaru* to great length, and cut them down in a single swing. One horizontal line. The bisected skeletons turned to ripped paper. The only enemy left in the ring was Sara—

"It's overrr!"

Kuraudo extended his sword again, aiming at his last enemy's neck. Against that, Sara didn't stay still. Moving her arm at a blurring speed once more, she drew something using *Brush of the Demiurge*. But whatever. Whether it was a tank or a fighter jet or a giant robot—it wouldn't be a match for Kuraudo. No matter what appeared, he'd cut it down! With such spirit, Kuraudo swung *Orochimaru* with all his might.

But—

Clang

The air rang with the sound of heavy clashing metal, and the white bone blade lurched back.

"….Wh…!"

At that moment, Kuraudo's expression was frozen in shock. His full-force attack had been blocked—no, it was more than that. It had been stopped by Kaleidoscope Sara Bloodlily, the lowest opponent. Now Kuraudo was confused to the point that he couldn't recover. And the thing so surprising that he couldn't breathe was—

The thing that had blown Kuraudo's full force attack back was a black-haired boy holding a glimmering black katana.

"Purple Caricature—Crownless Sword King." [13]

And Sara said this.

"If you want to fight him so badly… then you can do it as much as you like."

Instantly, the Crownless Sword King who'd pushed *Orochimaru* back lowered his waist.

Oh sh—!

"Ittou Shura."

Piercing the distance clad in a blue light that cut through the atmosphere, in a flash that no sword could keep up with, he cut deeply into Kuraudo's chest.

"Gaaahhh!"

An attack that sliced his exposed skull tattoo diagonally. The unexpected blade strike made Kuraudo stagger, his blood splashing. But his shock was greater than the damage of the wound. His eyes were locked wide open at the impossible reality before him, and he had no words for it. Nor was he the only one surprised.

「Wh...What is going on!? Contender Kurogane who must be in the waiting room suddenly appeared in the ring, and attacked Contender Kurashiki!」

「I-It can't be! Purple Caricature can even reproduce other Blazers…!?」

At Sara's incredible feat of recreating a Blazer and his Noble Art, the broadcasters and their commentary and the audience and everything else was frozen in disbelief. The Crownless Sword King created by Purple Caricature didn't let this good opportunity go. With sharp strikes that were surely no weaker than Ikki's own, he pressed the attack. Against them, Kuraudo wouldn't be able to counter—

「Contender Kurashiki is on the defensive! He can't make a move!

Can he overcome this situation…!?」

「This is terrible for Contender Kurashiki, isn't it? The strength of his Marginal Counter is reaction speed above human norms and the movement speed it allows. Those two speed advantages provide him all kinds of front-line tactical choices. Originally, it would make him an even match with the Crownless Sword King using Ittou Shura, and he could probably stay defensive for one minute—but it seems dual wielding is too much. His reaction speed is still better than the Crownless Sword King, but the maximum acceleration of moving two swords can't keep up with Marginal Counter. At this rate….」

They gave way. The action progressed even faster than Muroto could explain it. Kuraudo's defense with two blades finally gave way, and the strikes from a glimmering black blade the same as the real Crownless Sword King's began to mangle Kuraudo's flesh. In the middle of the ring, fresh blood flew. The Crownless Sword King had been using Ittou Shura for less than twenty seconds. At this rate, Kuraudo couldn't possibly endure.

"Dammit…!"

This fact made Kuraudo grind his teeth.

Am I gonna lose again…!?

Even though he had coughed and pissed blood, worked himself with the intent to change his own soul's shape—

Can I—not beat this guy….

His mind seemed to fracture at this frustration. While taking one hit after another from the Crownless Sword King, his heart was cracking just like his bones. But in that situation, one man's voice consumed Kuraudo's mind. That was—

「Why do you want a rematch with Kurogane-kun this much?」

At the Ayatsuji dojo, he had confronted Kaito… to kneel before the man and beg for training. This had been Kaito's response. Kaito knew Kuraudo wasn't the type to lower his head for anyone, so Kaito asked what the reason was for going this far. Kuraudo's reply was—

「I'm the same as you.」

And his gaze shifted to what Kaito was holding in one hand.

「Even though you just got out of the hospital, and who knows how many years you've got left to live, you're spending another night in a dead dojo doing stuff like this so seriously. In other words, you—hate that you lost to me, and you're not gonna let it go, right?」

「—Right.」

「I'm no different. I'm not gonna stay the loser. My insides are seething—I'm not gonna sit around doing nothing!」

That's right. That's exactly right. He wasn't going to stand getting beaten. So he'll win. He came here to win against Ikki, nothing else. So—

"...Don't… fuck with me…."

He couldn't lose. He couldn't lose to this flimsy imitation…! That honest and straightforward-to-a-fault guy wasn't waiting around for even a second. That guy was rapidly, steadily moving forward, getting farther away at unbelievable speed. But Kuraudo didn't want to be left behind. Yeah, he wanted to be like that. For the first time in Kuraudo's life, he found someone worth admiring. So—

"I'm not gonna lose! To some damn fake!"

With that blood-drenched scream, he struck simultaneously from both left and right using Hebigami. But his counterattack was weakened; Kuraudo had already lost too much blood—

Slash

Kuraudo's counter was brushed away, and conversely his torso was cut deeply into. The spray of blood that followed was clearly fatal. His knee was broken and his posture collapsed. His body fell to the ring at last. And at the moment of his fall—

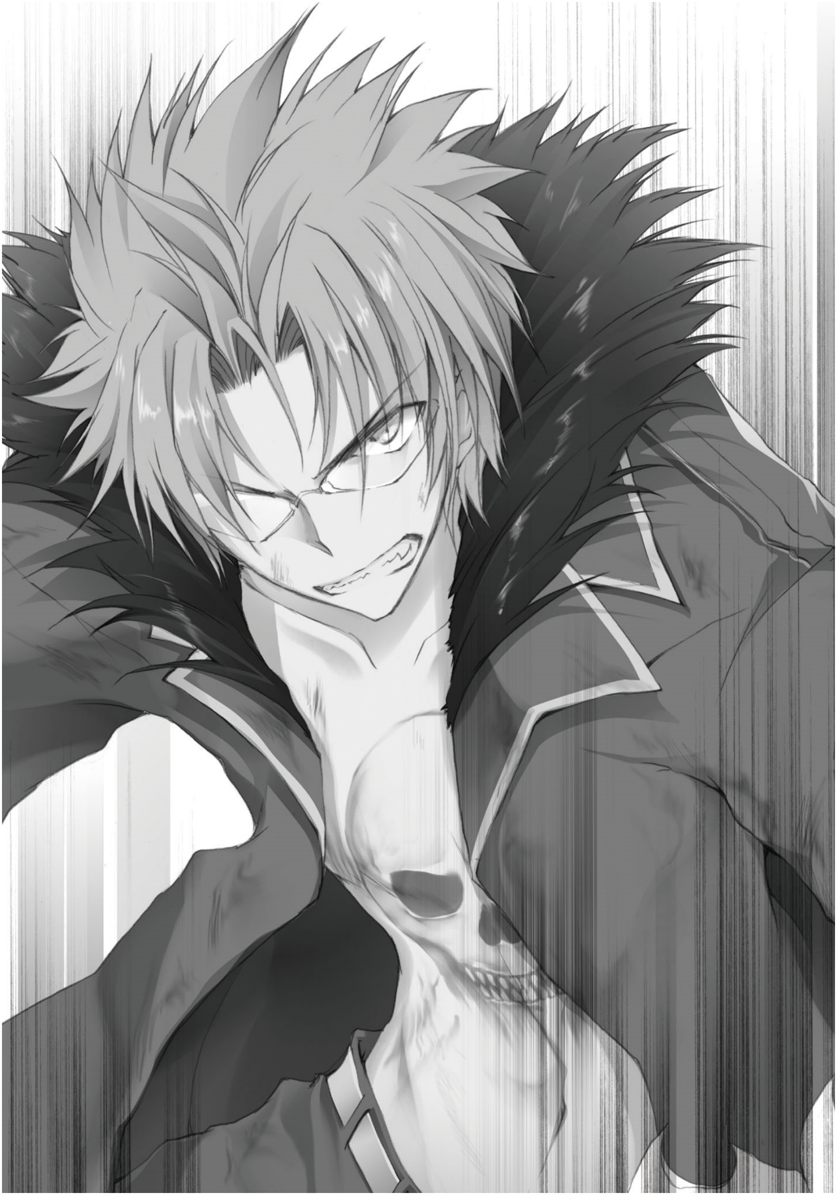
"Kuraudooo! Don't give uuuuuppp!"

A desperate yell of support entered his ears. It was the voice of a guy Kuraudo knew well. A voice he couldn't forget even if he wanted to. When he looked in that direction, indeed that guy was there. Under the red gate, hurry from the waiting room, it was the true Ikki Kurogane. That's right, that guy definitely rushed here, if only to give Kuraudo the slightest push just as he was about to crumble any moment. And that support certainly reached Kuraudo —

Snap

Something exploded in Kuraudo's head, in his heart. A blaze of fury and hatred ignited.

—Why? Why are you here? Why are you cheering me on? And with that desperate expression? Why? **As if I need that kind of thing from you!?**



"Don't look down on me, Kuroganeeeee—!"

Kuraudo's world turned red from outrage. The oxygen-carrying blood in his body started to move at an unprecedented speed, bringing unparalleled vitality to his near-crumpled body. His feet were once again planted firm on the ground, holding Kuraudo's body strong. At that moment, Kuraudo's spirit was surpassing his flesh due to the rage toward Ikki he felt. It was a miraculous moment in which he passed his highest limits. An impossible moment that would vanish like a dream if he took even a single breath more. But for Kuraudo, it was enough. Wagering all his soul, he struck the Crownless Sword King before him in that one moment—

"HAAAAA—!"

Moving his body with extreme speed, he made eight attacks with his own self-taught swordsmanship—Yamata no Orochi.

Kuraudo did so with two swords. In other words, a total of sixteen slashes! It too was different from what it was before, now a series of slashes refined by Kaito. It was the utmost extreme that a combat prodigy born with the natural ability called Marginal Counter could achieve at this moment. Using Ten'i Muhou to slip through it like Ikki had done before would be impossible, and even the world's strongest sword couldn't defend against sixteen strikes flying toward it in an instant—

The Crownless Sword King's body was chopped to pieces, his human shape turning back to mundane paper scattering to the wind—

Two black katanas pierced Kuraudo's body noisily.

Kuraudo stared with dry eyes. Before him, there stood two Crownless Sword Kings clad in blue light, their swords stabbed into him.

「…then you can do it as much as you like.」

Kuraudo now understood what Sara had meant back then. It had been neither provocation nor sarcasm. Its meaning was literal. Sara Bloodlily could do such a thing. She could draw however many dozens of Crownless Sword Kings that it would take until Kuraudo crumbled.

"...Ah."

A gob of blood spilled from Kuraudo's mouth. Twin swords of bone fell from limp hands.

—Battle was always heartless. No matter how strong the wish one held, there would only be a single victor in the ring. The desires of those who fall are left behind, with no one sparing them a backward glance.

"D...Dammit…."

Here and now, a single man's wish to catch up and surpass his foe came to an end.

Part 10

「Contender Kurashiki falls in the ring, and the chief referee has stopped the match! It's over! The winner is Contender Sara Bloodlily!」

The name of the victor was declared by the broadcaster. But from the audience seats where excitement and accolades usually came, there was only a low rumble of confusion. It was because of Sara Bloodlily's overwhelming strength.

「Even though the battle is over, the venue hall is silent. There are only caught breaths and shocked gazes at the winner standing in the ring! But that is not unreasonable. Contender Sara's strength… doesn't seem to be C-Rank at all!」

「She was hiding her power, wasn't she?」

「Commentator Muroto, you do believe that's the case?」

「Yes, it happens occasionally. Blazers who have an overwhelming power, or those who don't wish for opponents measure their strength, purposefully restrain themselves to just barely qualify as Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival representatives, hiding their abilities.」

Yes, that does happen sometimes. First-class mage-knights don't want to show their hands. For example, Seven Stars Sword King Yuudai Moroboshi had once hidden the fact that he could disrupt Devices using his Noble Art Tiger Bite. However—

「…But even so, this strength is… abnormal.」

Muroto's grumbling voice was trembling. As a former KOK A-League member, he understood how strange Sara's ability was.

「The ability to not only manipulate color, but give a drawn image substance. That alone is extremely powerful. But Contender Bloodlily was born able to reproduce Blazers, and entire Noble Arts. In other words, if she wanted to she could use every Blazer ability....」

—Clearly there were no blind spots to that power. A method to defeat it would be impossible to find.

「Moreover, even while making that many weapons and soldiers, and creating Blazers as well, she did not run out of magic power... Contender Sara Bloodlily's rank must be revised immediately. She is undoubtedly a match for the Crimson Princess and the Sword Emperor of Wind, an A-Rank Blazer!」

In the smothering silence of the confused venue hall, Kuraudo who had used up all his strength and lost consciousness was carried past Ikki in a stretcher.

The Sword Eater was strong. He had attained a strength that couldn't be compared to what it was when they fought, holding talent enough to learn both two-sword style and Ten'i Muhou in a short time. And in this fight, he had displayed an outstanding battle sense... but even staking his soul on the match, he wasn't able to win.

No, that wasn't it. In the end, he hadn't even been able to give Sara a single wound.

"The Bloody Da Vinci, Sara Bloodlily...."

Ikki swallowed a breath as he watched Sara walk off. Indeed, the Beast Tamer had previously said as much without it seeming like flattery. Without a doubt, there were one or two in this tournament he'd have to fight with his true strength.

I have to go up against multiple monsters like that in a row...?

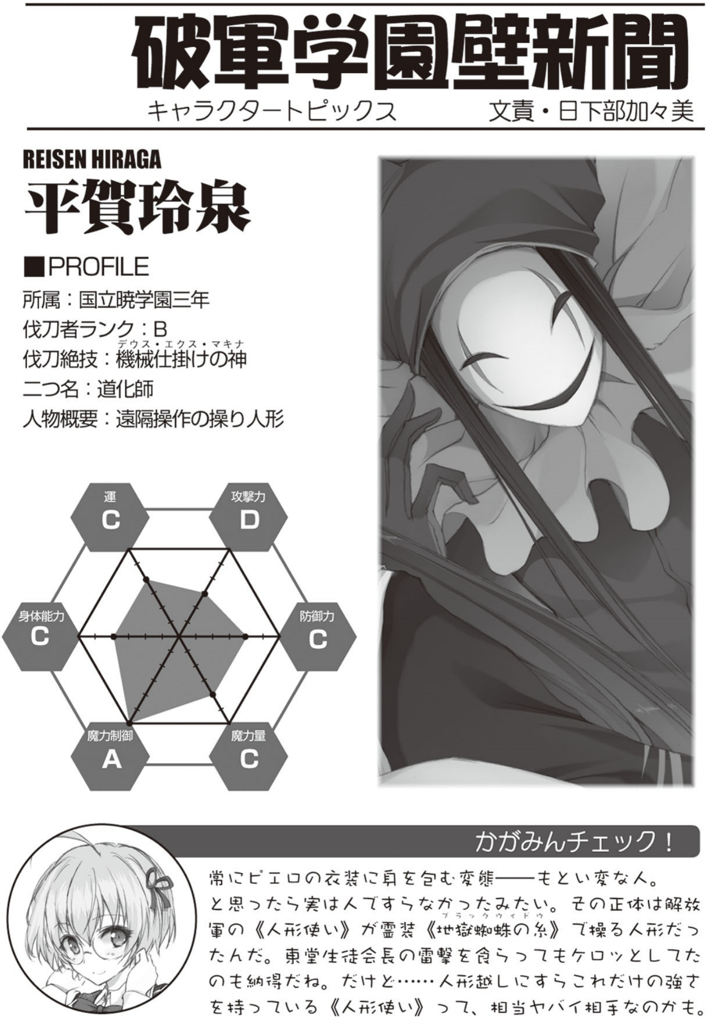
Ikki's shoulders sank at this heavy realization.

References

1. ↑ Five billion yen is approximately 45 million United States dollars.
2. ↑ One hundred billion yen is approximately nine hundred million US dollars. In comparison, this is in the same price magnitude as the Japanese broadcast rights for eight years of Olympic games.
3. ↑ *Jakotsu Soujin*, 蛇骨双刃: "Snake Bone Twinblades"
4. ↑ *Brush of the Demiurge*: This is an exact translation of デミウルゴスの筆, *demiurugosu no fude*.
5. ↑ *Color of Magic—Aqua Blue of Water Surface*: This uses the kanji 色彩魔術—水面のアクアブルー, *shikisai majutsu—minamo no akuaburuu* ("Color Spellcasting—Aqua Blue of Water Surface").
6. ↑ *Color of Magic—Fire Red of Brilliant Blaze*: This uses the kanji 色彩魔術—赫炎のファイアレート, *shikisai majutsu—kakuen no faiareddo* ("Color Spellcasting—Fire Red of Brilliant Blaze").
7. ↑ *Color of Magic—Silk White of Steady Guidance*: This uses the kanji 色彩魔術—導きのシルクホワイト, *shikisai majutsu—michibiki no shirukuhowaito* ("Color Spellcasting—Silk White of Guidance").
8. ↑ *Color of Magic—Gunmetal Gray of Rigid Steel*: This uses the kanji 色彩魔術—鋼のガンメタル, *shikisai majutsu—hagane no ganmetaru* ("Color Spellcasting—Steel Gunmetal").
9. ↑ *Purple Caricature—Thompson*: This uses the kanji 幻想戯画—トンプソン, *gensou giga—tonposon* ("Illusional Caricature—Thompson").
10. ↑ *Purple Caricature—Tomahawk*: This uses the kanji 幻想戯画—トマホーク, *gensou giga—tomahouku* ("Illusional Caricature—Tomahawk").
11. ↑ *Purple Caricature—Necro Battalion*: This uses the kanji 幻想戯画—死霊軍隊, *gensou giga—shiryou guntai* ("Illusional Caricature—Ghost Army").
12. ↑ *Dora●mon*: Doraemon, a character from the manga of the same name by Fujiko Fujio. He produces all kinds of gadgets from his pocket.
13. ↑ *Purple Caricature—Crownless Sword King*: This uses the kanji 幻想戯画—無冠の剣王, *gensou giga—mukan no ken'ou*

("Illusional Caricature—Crownless Sword King").

Intermission: Blackout



破軍学園壁新聞

キャラクタートピックス　文責・日下部加々美

REISEN HIRAGA

平賀玲泉

■PROFILE

所属：国立暁学園三年
伐刀者ランク：B
伐刀絶技：機械仕掛けの神（デウス・エクス・マキナ）
二つ名：道化師
人物概要：遠隔操作の操り人形

運 C
攻撃力 D
防御力 C
魔力量 C
魔力制御 A
身体能力 C

かがみんチェック！

常にピエロの衣装に身を包む変態——もとい変な人。
と思ったら実は人ですらなかったみたい。その正体は解放軍の《人形使い》が霊装《地獄蜘蛛の糸（ブラックウィドウ）》で操る人形だったんだ。東堂生徒会長の雷撃を食らってもケロッとしてたのも納得だね。だけど……人形越しにすらこれだけの強さを持っている《人形使い》って、相当ヤバイ相手なのかも。

"Sheesh. After Stella-chan beat 'em up so soundly, I thought things would calm down, but something this ridiculous still happened."

Yuudai Moroboshi, having seen all of Kuraudo's match from the blue gate waiting room, expressed his astonishment. Since he had competed with the Crownless Sword King himself, Moroboshi understood that the imitation was the real deal. Neither the sharpness and clarity of the technique nor that tactical discernment were any different from the genuine article. To be the complete equal of the knight he had lost to… ahh, what kind of nightmare was that?

"Even if you beat Kurogane, she'll be waiting in the third round, so you watch out, alright?"

Laughing loudly, Moroboshi slapped the shoulder of Byakuya who was making a complicated face. Byakuya responded with his honest opinion.

"Yuu… are you encouraging me or pressuring me? Which is it?"

"I'm making fun, of course."

"Go home."

"Fine by me. Not like you need any cheering up."

Moroboshi spoke nonchalantly, but they've known each other for quite a long time. Because Byakuya knew that Moroboshi was here out of worry no matter what was coming out of his mouth, Byakuya had no need to speak so hardheartedly either.

"All things considered, Shiro, you're is the same as ever, ignoring the match after the next, focusing on the board in front of you."

Moroboshi casually glanced at the shogi board Byakuya had spread on an equipment table.

"This is my way of warming up."

"Ain't martial arts and brainy games just like water and oil?"

At the question, Byakuya laughed as if it was a little bit funny. He thought it was just like Moroboshi to think so, being the type to adapt to situations with a wild animal's sensitivity.

"As far as I'm concerned, a duel is a mental game, not a martial arts bout. A battle starts with knowing the opponent's moves and understanding his approach. And by comprehending the opponent's principles, one can see one or two steps ahead—but that's just the most basic of basics. There's opponent's physique of course, and how his personality affects his way of thinking in battle. How he uses his skills in every situation. His coordination patterns. The details of how his sight shifts and affects his movements. The opponent's breathing. If I analyze and scrutinize all the data—I can see how the fight ends before it even starts."

"Ho? Then you can already see the checkmate?"

At this question, Byakuya didn't meet Moroboshi's eyes, though his mouth curled into the tiniest smiles.

"In twenty three moves… the Crownless Sword King will use Shinkirou to escape to the right, and that'll be my win. Undoubtedly."

”…I wouldn't assume that guy moves the way you'd think if I were you. He ain't got a widely variable ability, but his way of using it is pretty diverse. He might still be hiding something."

At this warning, Byakuya realized that this was the reason Moroboshi had come here: along with everything else, to help out a classmate. Byakuya was glad to receive his friend's thoughtfulness, and in return—

"It's as you say, Yuu. He's a knight whose ability doesn't seem like much, but he's a trickster who uses what he has in all kinds of ways. It will likely be difficult to grasp each and every one of his moves. However, the next match is different."

Byakuya was denying Moroboshi's concern upfront、with a powerfully confident voice.

"What do you mean?"

"Within the bounds of the next match, it will be very easy to predict his moves. Because you see, the Crownless Sword King has a fatal weakness."

A fatal weakness. At Byakuya's phrasing, Moroboshi could guess the meaning.

"…You talking about the limits of his ability?"

"Yes, exactly. His ability is extreme concentration of personal strength to use it all within a short span of time. And when he does so, he can't moderate it to let him to use it a second time within the same day. A very inflexible characteristic. In other words… because we will have two consecutive rounds today, he won't be able to use his ability carelessly."

"Ya sure say that confidently. If there's two rounds then he could also use it in the first one, you know. That means yours."

At Moroboshi's words, Byakuya shook his head.

"No, that won't happen. Because Sara Bloodlily can produce multiple imitations of him who use Ittou Shura, he will definitely save his own for that match. And more than anything… there's a reason he must reach the top of this tournament."

"A reason…?"

"If he doesn't become Seven Stars Sword King, then he won't be able to graduate, or become licensed as a mage-knight."

"What the hell!?"

At Byakuya's words, Moroboshi's face became colored with astonishment.

"Why would something like that be true!?"

"It seems his family is holding him back, since they don't want to be known for producing an F-Rank. Apparently he needs a way to get the title without their consent."

"...No way."

Being a student from a different school, Moroboshi hadn't known this condition imposed on Ikki. However, Byakuya had thoroughly researched Ikki, so all of Ikki's burdens, his complicated family situation, and even this absurd promise had been dug up. And this was why Byakuya was sure that in the next match, Ikki wouldn't use Ittou Shura.

"Certainly, if he was facing off against the previous national champion, he might need to go all out and use his trump card, but he's always aiming for the top. He has no choice in that. And moreover… against an opponent who can reproduce his powers, he can't afford to lose his trump card. Not if he wants to win through to the end, that is."

At that moment, the announcement calling for Ikki and Byakuya sounded.

"Alright, I'm off."

With that, Byakuya left the waiting room, and continued down the dim path to the ring where spectators were watching intently. Seeing his figure appear, the hall erupted in cheers, but none of that sound reached Byakuya. None of it reached him in his focused state. Such unnecessary information glided past his attention, unworthy of his notice. The voices of the audience, even the scene of the outside world did not enter his senses at all. Right now, what existed in Byakuya's senses was a wide, silent, pure white world.

And in its center was a single thing making his blood pulse, Ikki Kurogane.

Both eyes behind Byakuya's glasses narrowed, and studied the opponent. Ikki was… very focused, with a straightforward gaze that contained neither nervousness nor fear, and no trembling heart. Even in Ikki's concentration, he did not forget to relax. For anyone looking forward to battle, this was certainly the ideal physical state.

Byakuya saw this, and found it was splendid. Were it otherwise, that would be a problem. If the opponent wasn't present at best condition, if the opponent couldn't use his mental acuity to the utmost—

This twenty-three move game won't finish perfectly."

This was as an important to Byakuya as the victory itself. His aesthetics weren't about simply fighting and victory or defeat. What he longed for wasn't an uncivilized brawl, nor was it just comparing techniques. What he wanted was a higher level match of mind versus mind. Ikki Kurogane—if it was this boy, he'd definitely get that. In this silence, they'll play one move after another, a duel matching wit against wit. A conflict not unlike sharp haggling. And these twenty-three moves will be a beautiful thing spoken of for years. So—

「And now, C-Block's second round second match begins! LET'S GET STARTED!」

—come, let this arena be the stage for their supreme chess game!

Eye of Heaven Byakuya Jougasaki's memory cut off there, disconnected as abruptly as a TV signal. What remained was the void of ignorance. But before his consciousness fell totally into darkness, he heard only two words echoing—

"Ittou Rasetsu."

Afterword

I wanna play Monster Hunterrr[1]!

Sorry for the outburst. This is Riku Misora. Work's been extremely busy so I haven't had any time for Monster Hunter. I wanna play it.

Eh? Where's the stuff about cats I said I'd write about last volume? Sorry, that was a lie. I haven't gotten one yet. As replacement, would you like to hear how the new house has roaches popping up who're halfway to being consider pets at this point—CENSORED.

Anyway, that's enough idle chatting. The first round of the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival ends in this chapter, and we're already rushing into the second round. Unexpected people ate up a surprising number of pages. Even the author is surprised (ha!). And Stella-san's steadily marching into the spotlight as the heroine. But have you ever seen a heroine who welds her own arm back together? How unexpected. For me too. But there's no helping it. She's a heroine, but at the same time this girl is the last boss Ikki swore to face in a rematch in the finals. For the sake of her oath with her precious sweetheart, she can't just be a cute face. Well, whether she'll really be the last boss, and whether Ikki can actually reach the finals, will have to depend on their tenacity, right? For that reason, I'd be glad if you watch over them in the next volume too.

As for the rest, it seems that the Rakudai Kishi manga tankoubons are on sale. Since Stella in the manga is extremely cute, I hope you'll definitely read that.

Okay, that wraps up this volume's afterword. Thank you for finishing volume six.

References

1. ↑ *Monster Hunter*: A fantasy video franchise by Capcom, in which players take on quests to defeat monsters.

Rakudai Kishi no Eiyuutan - Volume 06

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